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ABSTRACT

This report is an assessment of the charter school program in the District of Columbia during the 1998-1999 school year. It provides descriptive information on public charter schools based on more than 70 interviews with school leaders, teachers, parents, charter advocates, and government officials. Findings show that charter schools in the District of Columbia have found an eager clientele. Although it was initially imposed by Congress, the charter school concept in many respects reflects the District's tradition of homegrown efforts to reform education through decentralization and choice. From the perspective of DC parents, the specific pedagogical and organizational distinctions among the charter schools may be less significant than the simple fact that they represent something different from their children's current schools. The smaller size and more intimate setting of charter schools may also contribute to their appeal. For those who fear that charter schools will cater to an already favored elite, the evidence from the District is generally reassuring. However, preliminary evidence suggests that charter schools will not produce the substantial cost-savings that some envisioned. Evidence does not suggest that parental involvement is higher for public charter schools, and it is too early to determine whether public charter schools have improved student achievement. Charter school progress in the District of Columbia suffers from breakdowns in communication and some bureaucratic tensions, but some of the tension is a predictable and perhaps unavoidable offshoot of the deliberately ambiguous nature of the charter concept. It is not yet clear whether charter schools will lead to the revitalization of the traditional public education system or its evisceration. Some recommendations are made for the cautious embrace of charter schools with targeted support and clear management policies. (Contains 9 figures, 4 tables, and 66 endnotes.) (SLD)

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Making a Choice, Making a Difference?

An Evaluation of Charter Schools in the District of Columbia

CWAS

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Making a Choice, Making a Difference?

An Evaluation of Charter Schools in the District of Columbia

THE CENTER FOR WASHINGTON AREA STUDIES

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

NOVEMBER, 1999

Researched and Written by
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and

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the passage of the District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995, Congress propelled the District into the ranks of the 32 states employing public charter schools as a solution to address the poorly performing local public elementary and secondary education system. This report, conducted by researchers of The George Washington University's Center for Washington Area Studies, is an assessment of the District's charter school program during the 1998-99 school year. It provides descriptive information on public charter schools based on over 60 interviews with school leaders, teachers, parents, charter advocates, and government officials.

Principal Findings

- **Charter schools in the District of Columbia have found an eager clientele.**

  When the first two public charter schools opened during the 1996 school year, few would have imagined the startling expansion in the number of charter schools in two years. Today—with one charter school for every five traditional public schools and one charter student for every ten or eleven students in the DC Public School system (DCPS)--D.C. is arguably the single most "charter-ized" jurisdiction in the entire country.

- **Although initially imposed by Congress, the charter school concept in many respects reflects the District's tradition of homegrown efforts to reform education through decentralization and choice.**

  The District has a strong tradition of innovation in public education. Many of the basic currents of school choice can be traced back as early as the 1960s when DC was regarded as a national leader in the movement to decentralize decision-making to local schools and local communities. Well before charter schools, DC had instituted innovative programs like the Duke Ellington School for the Arts; the School Without Walls; public Montessori programs; and career-oriented high school options. Both the elected school board and the City Council had approved charter programs before Congress got involved.

- **From the perspective of DC parents, the specific pedagogical and organizational distinctions among the charter schools may be less significant than the simple fact that they represent something different from their children's current schools.**

When parents in our sample were asked why they choose to send their child to a charter school they said they were drawn less by special programs than by several factors presumably central to *any* good school: good and caring teachers; an open and supportive attitude toward children and their families; and emphasis on achievement. Very few of the parents said they had "shopped around," and most knew little about other charter school options in the District.

- **Many of the charter schools offer a smaller size and more intimate setting that may also contribute to their appeal.**

  In Fall 1998, nearly 50 percent of all charter schools held fewer than 100 students compared to fewer than 1 percent of DCPS schools. Only about 25 percent of charter schools currently have 300 or more students, compared to about 85 percent of DCPS schools. But some of the charters are expected to grow considerably over time, so some of this initial advantage in size may gradually erode.

- **For those who fear that charters will cater to an already-favored elite, the evidence from DC to date is generally reassuring.**

  Our data indicate that charter schools are not creaming the top pool of applicants from DCPS schools. DCPS schools enroll more black students, however, public charter schools enroll more Hispanic students. Approximately two-thirds of all students enrolled in both public charter schools and DCPS schools come from low-income families. In addition, a few public charter schools appear to serve more students, on average, with limited English proficiency and disabilities than DCPS schools.

- **While public charter schools come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and most advertise some special emphasis or theme in an effort to distinguish themselves from traditional public schools, about half actually appear to offer a general liberal arts curriculum not sharply differentiated from that offered in DCPS.**

  In some sense, the diversity of offerings at public charter schools is quite striking. In curriculum and teaching style, schools range from those that offer a broad liberal arts curriculum to those emphasizing special themes, such as math and science, public policy, or the arts. However, it appears that the charter movement in DC is relatively less likely to emphasize some form of curricular innovation and instead emphasize a particular subject theme (e.g. the arts, math/science, foreign language) than either a "back-to-the basics" or a "alternative/progressive" approach.

- **Preliminary evidence from the District of Columbia suggests that charter schools will not produce the substantial cost-savings that some envisioned.**

  Our observations suggest that public charter schools in the District are not recognizing large cost savings to date for either DCPS or the schools themselves. Rather than ratifying the claim that quality education can be delivered at bargain prices, DC charters are echoing traditional public schools in their insistence that good education for inner-city children requires spending more, not less.

- **Evidence does not suggest that parental involvement is higher for public charter schools .**

While we have not undertaken a comprehensive analysis of parent participation, our evidence suggests that there is some effort on the part of public charter schools to reach out to parents. By and large, however, public charter schools are finding that they—like the traditional public schools—face an exceedingly difficult challenge when they attempt to entice parents to become more involved. Interestingly, in at least some schools, there are signs that parents may find the founders' school themes *too* innovative for their tastes. One school that placed a heavy emphasis on students' creativity and independent thinking, for example, found that some parents were unhappy that there was not more drilling and regular preparation for standardized tests.

- **It is too early to determine whether public charter schools have improved student achievement.**

During our interviews, school personnel repeatedly mentioned that a large proportion of students entering their schools was not at grade level for reading or math. This caused school personnel to revise their curriculums and focus on mastering basic skills. And as the recently published results suggest, students in public charter schools, on average, scored poorly on the Spring test. However, it would be unfair to use these first year results as measures of accountability.

- **There is a critical breakdown of communication among public charter schools, DCPS, and the elected Board of Education that is impeding charter school progress.**

In every school in our sample we were told about difficulties working with DCPS officials. The complaints ranged from inability to secure a school facility to problems obtaining student records. These complaints were also expressed by chartering authorities and local foundations who are trying to mend the situation. While both the Public Charter School Board and Board of Education have staff available to assist charters with administrative and legal concerns, it appears that schools chartered by the Board of Education are frustrated by the lack of support and personnel available on staff to address their questions and concerns.

- **It is a mistake to wholly attribute the tensions to bureaucratic indifference or outright hostility toward charters on the part of DCPS and the elected Board of Education.**

Some of the tension is a predictable and perhaps unavoidable offshoot of the deliberately ambiguous nature of the charter concept. It is simply not yet clear whether charter schools will lead to the revitalization of the traditional public education system or its evisceration. Important philosophical issues remain to be worked out regarding the role of democratic control and proper balance between providing support for the fledgling charter movement and the need to exercise oversight and to weigh the needs of charters against other compelling values.

Recommendation and Issues for Key Stakeholders

- **We recommend a strategy of cautious embrace and targeted support.**

  A cautious embrace of charters, coupled with targeted efforts to support those aspects that are most reflective of local ideals, is more likely to steer things in that direction than either resistance or indifference. One reasonable alternative is to focus less on particular schools and more on the array of institutions that do or could support charter schools and public school choice more generally. We see at least three key infrastructure nodes where targeted support might generate substantial pay-offs, and not just for the charter schools but for DCPS as well. These are: technological support and professional development, parental information systems, and political representation and collective self-help.

- **Issues for the Mayor and City Council**

  The main issue for the Mayor and City Council is the potential for growth of the charter school movement and any competition it produces with DCPS. A well-developed policy is needed that considers the possibility that the charter alternative will sap some of the resources and support from the broader public system. It is appropriate that local officials balance any new enthusiasms for charters against the need to ensure that DCPS is nurtured and improved simultaneously.

- **Board of Education and Public Charter School Board**

  Presently, there appears to be a shortage of staff at both chartering entities to monitor existing schools, approve new schools, and provide the technical and managerial support that public charter schools require. The need appears to be the greatest for the Board of Education, which has fewer full-time staff and consultants to share these responsibilities. While some have proposed eliminating the Board of Education's role entirely, we believe that the advantages of having multiple chartering agencies and in retaining a direct link to a democratically elected board outweigh any prospective gains. A second issue for chartering authorities is to ensure that the application process for prospective schools is rigorous, to reduce the probability of school failures caused by administrative or financial mismanagement, and to discover the best balance between scrupulous oversight and helping charter schools succeed.

- **District of Columbia Public Schools**

  Perhaps the most obvious conclusion from this study is the immediate need for DCPS to implement a clear facilities management policy for public charter schools. As stipulated by law, public charter schools should have the opportunity to take advantage of unused or underutilized school facilities. However, for various reasons, there have been tremendous difficulties initiating a fair policy. Some of these may reflect DCPS resentment toward the charters, but there also are legitimate reasons why local public authorities might be wary about transferring DCPS properties to new and untested entities at highly discounted prices. Solving this problem requires addressing these deeper issues, but doing so now would send a positive message to public charter schools and the larger community and help strengthen the image of DCPS. Also, public charter schools need to receive adequate information about their students as quickly as possible from DCPS.

- **Non-profit Philanthropic Organizations**

  Because of limited resources, philanthropic organizations that wish to support the charter experiment are encouraged to select charter schools with the greatest likelihood of affecting their intended clientele. However, philanthropic organizations supporting charter schools should be sure to look beyond charismatic leaders for the existence of a strong, stable management structure. Adopting a strategy that supports the larger system may be a more useful way to allocate scarce resources.

While not all of the schools in the District have passed the critical threshold of sustainability, public charter schools as a government policy and alternative form of education has laid down permanent roots. Supporters of charters need to realize that their best future opportunities lie in working with the District Government and public education system, not against it. Supporters of DCPS need to tap the energy and resources represented by the local charter movement, and find ways to draw those into a broader political constituency that promotes investment in all facets of the local public education system.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

With passage of the *District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995*, the U.S. Congress catapulted the District of Columbia into the forefront of a growing national experiment with charter schools. This was not a program that evolved after years or even weeks of local debate and deliberation, in fact, most local residents probably knew little or nothing about charter schools at the time Congress acted. Some that *did* know about charters were far from enthusiastic about their community being forced to play the guinea pig for an educational innovation that was unproven and seemingly alien to local traditions and desires.

Despite such reluctance, the charter seed fell upon fertile ground. A large number of local and non-local groups, many representing a political orientation far removed from the perceived "conservative" charter school concept, suddenly were applying for charters. Thousands of local families lined up to gain access to those that were approved. Today—with one charter school for every five traditional public schools and one charter student for every ten or eleven students in the DC Public School system (DCPS)--DC is arguably the single most "charter-ized" jurisdiction in the entire country.

Many education analysts, and certainly many political leaders, believe that charter schools may hold the key for improving the nation's schools. Charter schools are deliberately designed to straddle the line traditionally distinguishing public from private schools. That is, they are officially public schools, receiving public funding on a per student basis, but the charter concept envisions that they are to be independent in their management from government rules and regulations. Proponents believe that competition among charters—as well as between charters and conventional public schools—creates healthy market pressures to improve educational quality without expanding educational costs. While passionately held, these expectations have not yet been empirically tested.

For reasons such as these, many who have little direct reason to care about the condition of schools in the District of Columbia are interested in the course of events as they are unfolding here. What happens in DC almost certainly will have bearing upon of the broader educational debates that are happening in Congress, state legislatures, and local boards of education throughout the United States. Needless to say, for those who *do* care about the quality of life and long-term viability of the District of Columbia, because it is their local community, the stakes are higher still.

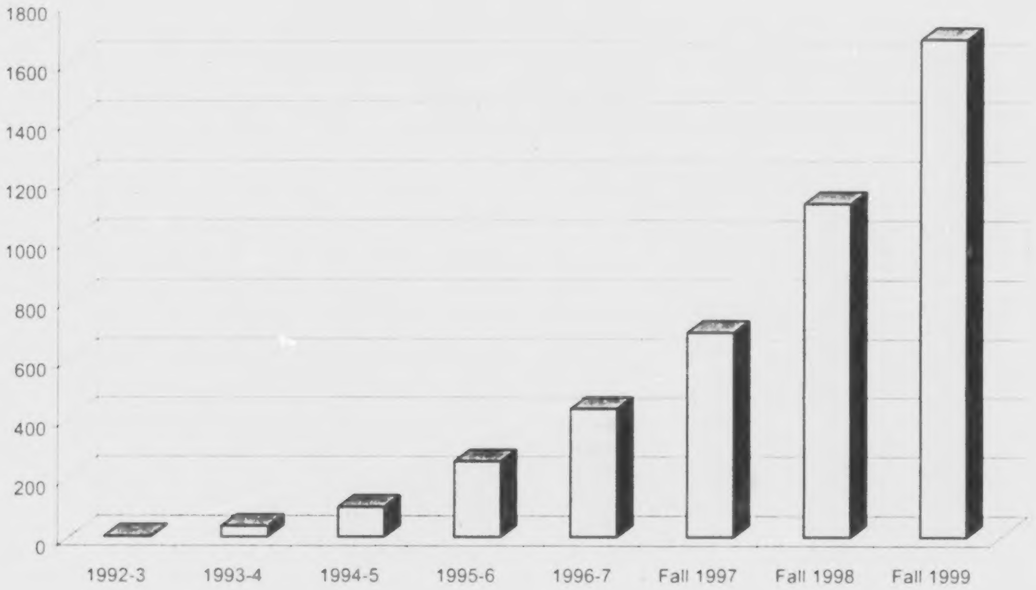
With so much at stake, but little actually known, the George Washington University's Center for Washington Area Studies proposed to undertake a careful assessment of the District's charter school program during the 1998-99 school year. The Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation and George Washington University provided the support to make this study possible. The report explains the origin of the charter school concept as it developed in DC and elsewhere, summarizes the objectives of charter proponents and the concerns of charter skeptics, presents baseline information about what the schools and chartering boards are actually doing, and identifies specific issues and problems that have emerged.

We believe that it is very important for DC citizens and the decision-makers that have the power to shape the District's educational programs to have the best possible information to guide them as this experiment unfolds. At the same time, we recognize the dangers that come from drawing snap judgments. The true costs and benefits of newly initiated social programs sometimes may not reveal themselves in the first several years of implementation. New programs sometimes stumble while key actors learn the ropes. By the same token, the waves of enthusiasm that accompany new programs sometimes mask underlying problems that emerge with a vengeance in subsequent years. Our goal in this initial report, accordingly, is not to declare charter schools either a failure or a success, but to provide a balanced assessment of what is happening so far. Included are practical suggestions for actions that might be taken—by public authorities, by foundations, by parent and community organizations—in order to increase the likelihood that the charter school experiment will be beneficial, especially for those students most dependent upon public schools as a vehicle for long-term personal growth and success.

Charter School Movement in the U.S.

Charter schools are a recent phenomenon in the long history of public elementary and secondary education in the United States. Beginning in 1991, when Minnesota passed the first charter school law, the movement quickly spread by 1999 to 36 states plus the District of Columbia. [1] As of September, 1999, approximately 1,682 charter schools were operating in 32 states and the District, serving roughly 350,000 students (see Figure 1).[2] The charter school movement has also spawned a network of state and national support organizations responding to the great interest in charter schools among individuals interested in establishing a school, parents interested in learning more about charter schools in their state, and public officials interested in formulating charter school policies.[3] According to one article, "charter schools have sometimes seemed to take on the aura of a 'silver bullet'—a magical solution to a variety of problems."[4]

Figure 1
Total Number of Charter Schools in the Nation, 1992-1999



Source: *Charter Schools Third Year Report*

The speed at which this reform has been adopted and implemented is partially a testimony to the public's dissatisfaction with the current public elementary and secondary education system and its desire for better schools and more educational choices for school-aged children. But sub-currents of party and ideology also play a role in propelling the charter idea. Conservative interest groups focus on the efficiency of a market driven school system and believe that creating competition by increasing educational choices for parents and students will improve the education system overall. Liberal proponents, including President Clinton and Education Secretary Riley, and advocates for low-income families and minority groups, endorse charters schools, focusing on parental choice and creating opportunities for entrepreneurial educators.

Opponents include some teacher organizations, local schools boards, state and district level administrators, and policy makers. These groups are concerned that charter schools may erode the standards of public education as a common societal value, leave behind the poor and most difficult to educate, exacerbate racial and ethnic segregation, diminish teacher rights, decrease funding to traditional public schools, and serve as the opening wedge for a more radical and risky voucher-style system.

Regardless of these concerns or the fact that empirical information examining whether charters schools are improving public education is slim and tentative, charter school legislation is rapidly moving forward in states as policy makers search for solutions to chronic problems in our education system.[5] As laboratories of change, state policy makers are adopting legislation that fits their unique needs resulting in distinctive education policies instead of producing a single model of charter legislation.

Important ways that state charter laws can differ include the extent to which there are limits on the number of charters that can be granted, whether existing public and private schools can convert to charter status, who has granting authority, the length of charter duration, allowance for collective bargaining, and teacher certification requirements. Of the states with charter laws in effect by September 1999, 18 have no limit on the number of charters schools allowed; the remaining states have either a statewide limit (ranging from 10 in New Mexico, Mississippi and Utah to 100 in California and New York), a ceiling on the number of new charters allowed per year, or a maximum number allowed in any district based on that district's enrollment.[6] While all states permit the conversion of public schools, private schools are only allowed to convert to charter status in five states and the District of Columbia. Charters are also granted by a variety of decision-making bodies at the state and local levels. In six states a charter is only granted by the state board, in 17 states local boards grants charters and in the remaining states a combination of state and local authorities grant charters.[7] In Delaware, Massachusetts, and Texas, for example, local boards grant charters for conversion schools and state boards charter newly created schools. States also range in the duration of their charters, from an annual review in Rhode Island to up to 15 years in Arizona.

Collective bargaining is permissible in all but four states: Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Of those states permitting collective bargaining with operating charter schools, the median percentage of certified teachers covered under these agreements is only eight percent. However, in five states and the District of Columbia at least 75 percent of teachers are covered by these agreements. In addition, five of the 36 states with charter school legislation have no teacher certification requirement (Arizona, District of Columbia, Florida, Texas, and Oklahoma). The remaining states either limit the percentage of teachers that must be certified in a school or place restrictions on the qualifications of non-certified teachers. For example, in Utah non-certified teachers must demonstrate competency in their teaching area. In Wisconsin non-certified teachers are permissible only if a search for a licensed teacher is unsuccessful.

Brief History of the Charter School Movement in the District of Columbia

Charter schools came to the District of Columbia through the combination of a few policy entrepreneurs promoting charters as a means of educational reform with a perceived need from policy makers for some sort of reform of the local public educational system. By most accounts, the DC public education system by 1995 was reaching a crisis stage. Allegations of financial mismanagement and corruption mixed with extremely low student test scores and high drop out rates combined to paint a bleak picture of public education. Into this mix came a newly empowered Republican Congress which brought with it an educational philosophy emphasizing concepts of market based competition for schools and parental choice. In this politically charged atmosphere, the congressional policy agenda for the District of Columbia was ripe for such a "conservative" approach to education reform. Those policy entrepreneurs in the District promoting charter schools happened to be in the right place at the right time.[8] Figure 2 presents a brief chronology of charter schools in DC.

A variety of educational reform groups, both formal organizations and informal coalitions, had been around Washington for some time, promoting various public policy solutions to the problems in the system. When Congress decided to take a direct hand in the District government through the Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority (hereafter referred to by its popular label: the "Control Board"), they stripped the elected Board of Education of its power and transferred it to an Emergency Board of Trustees under the Control Board's authority. Inclined to support a school choice system grounded in a model of market competition, the Republican Congress's enhanced control over District affairs provided them with the opportunity to implement their version of educational reform. Those school reformers active in the District promoting school choice reacted with enthusiasm and began not only building public support for a competitive approach, but began to assist in the establishment of potential charter schools.

Figure 2
Brief Chronology of Charter School History in the District of Columbia

1988 – Establishment of the D.C. Committee on Public Education (COPE) by the Federal City Council. The Council is a not-for-profit organization created to improve the quality of life in Washington, D.C. COPE was designed to help stimulate reform of the public school system by promoting public-private partnerships between DCPS and the District business community.

1995 – With a projected budget deficit of $722 million and an immediate cash shortage, Congress strips the District Government of much of its power and invests it in a Financial Control Board. The fiscal crisis had forced the DC Public School System to fire several hundred teachers.

1995 – The growing desire by Congress to reform the District's public education system generates an interest for promoting public charter schools and voucher programs as a means of establishing a set of schools in the District free of government regulation. Local organizations such as the Education First Coalition and COPE take an interest and begin working with Congress on a large reform package. The District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995 is introduced but fails in the Senate.

1996 – Elements of the Reform Act are placed in the District FY1996 appropriations legislation and charter schools become law. In anticipation of the new federal law, the District of Columbia enacted a similar law on charter schools with only a few minor differences.

1996 – Organizations supporting public charter schools begin to turn their attention to establishing several schools and providing the support necessary to make them successful. The Education First Coalition is renamed Friends in Of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS) and establishes itself as a not-for-profit organization.

1997 – With the facilities issue emerging as one of the most important hurdles to establishing a charter school, Congress amends the original law to provide charter schools with a special preference when they place bids with DCPS for vacant school buildings. The amendments also establish a New Charter School Revolving Fund to provide additional financial support to new schools.

1997 – COPE establishes its Charter School Resource Center to be a clearinghouse for technical information on how to establish and operate a charter school. One of the first charter schools, Marcus Garvey, collapses due to financial problems. However, by the end of the year five charter schools are open.

1998 – Nineteen charter schools are now open and operational for the academic year beginning in the fall.

1999 – Legislation passed by Congress removes the sunset provision on the charter school law, which would make the program permanent. The legislation also requires the District to develop a firm policy on the disposition of vacant public school buildings. The veto of the legislation by President Clinton leaves the future of the measures in doubt. Young Technocrats has its charter revoked over financial concerns. With the start of the new academic year there are now 28 charter schools operating in the District.

The original congressional educational reform legislation, the 1995 District of Columbia Reform Act[9], contained several approaches to educational reform, including the creation of public charter schools, implementing a tuition voucher program, and a highly controversial public/private school scholarship program. Ultimately, the legislation was filibustered in the Senate, but a streamlined version, stripped of the voucher and scholarship programs, was included in the District of Columbia section of a vast omnibus appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 1996.[10] The result was one of the strongest public charter schools laws in the nation. According to the Center for Education Reform, a pro-charter group that scores charter laws according to how conducive they are to the formation and independence of charter schools, DC's is one of the five "strongest" charter laws in the United States.[11]

Significantly, the new federal policy was not the first charter school law for the District. The District's often-maligned elected Board of Education (BOE) had moved in this direction well before Congress acted. In the early 1990s the Board instituted a

Figure3
Highlights of the District of Columbia Charter School Law
(District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995 – Public Law 104-134,
Amended by Public Laws 104-194 and 105-100. D.C. Code §31-2853.11-.25 and §31-2853.41-.43)

- Establishes the power to grant public charters in two bodies, the locally elected Board of Education, and the new Public Charter School Board. Each board has virtually identical authority and may grant up to 10 new charters each year;
- Public charter schools are required to be established as not-for-profit organizations;
- The boards of directors of public charter schools are required to be composed of at least two parents of enrolled students, permit membership by school teachers and staff but not exceed a total of fifteen members. Method of election or selection to a board is determined by the school individually in their charters;
- The schools may not be sectarian or affiliated with a religious institution;
- Existing public and private schools in the District may elect to convert into charter schools provided that a petition has been signed by at least two-thirds of all parents of students at the school and currently enrolled adult students;
- Exempts public charter schools from the statutes and regulations of the District of Columbia and from the direct supervisory authority of the Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools. This includes independent control over finances, administration, personnel and curriculum;
- The law does *not* require that teachers at the school be certified by the District of Columbia or by any other jurisdiction;
- Requires charter schools to accept any student who applies without regard to color, religion, national origin, intellectual capacity or disability provided that they are a resident of the District of Columbia. If the school receives more applications than it has available slots, students will be randomly selected through a lottery;
- Provides that public charter schools will receive public funds on a per-pupil basis at the same level as the traditional District public schools;
- Public charter schools are permitted to receive federal Title I support for students from low-income families as well as for English as a Second Language (ESL) Programs and special education programs;
- Provides public charter schools with a legal preference when bidding for the right to purchase or lease vacant public school buildings in the District;
- Provides an amount of money, based on a per-pupil formula, for the public charter schools to use for facilities purchase, lease and maintenance;
- Requires that an annual report be submitted to the chartering entity for public inspection. The report must contain information on finances, qualifications of staff, number of students and student performance, as well as all outside donations and grants to the school totaling at $500 or more;
- Requires the chartering boards to review the schools at least once every five years in order to see how the schools are meeting the goals laid out in their charters.

"school within a school charter" program that allowed teachers within selected public schools to develop distinct and relatively independent educational programs housed within existing public schools. Figure 3, above, presents highlights of the DC charter school law. Just prior to the enactment of the congressional legislation, moreover, District lawmakers had crafted and passed a local law establishing charter schools. This law, largely ignored and forgotten about today even though it is still on the books, is very similar to the federal law except that it only empowered the Board of Education to grant charters, while the federal legislation provides this authority to both the Board and a separate Public Charter School Board, whose members are appointed by the mayor from a list provided by the U.S. Department of Education. While the District law did not set a sunset provision on charter schools, it did require the chartering entity to review the performance of the school every five years, while the original federal law sunsets the entire program after five years regardless of performance. With the passage of the appropriations bill, the federal law became controlling and the local legislation all but forgotten. Yet, as we will emphasize later, the fact that local political forces had produced such an initiative on their own, belies the common presumption that charter schools are an alien idea, imposed from the top-down and lacking an indigenous constituency of their own.

The charter school friendly political climate on Capitol Hill provided an opportunity for local groups interested in promoting concepts of school choice as a means of reform. Organizations such as Friends of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS) and the Public Charter School Resource Center (an affiliate of the Committee on Public Education) worked to promote charter schools in the District, holding workshops for parties interested in setting up their own school and providing other forms of technical assistance. For those interested in dealing with the political side of the charter school issue, the DC Public Charter School Coalition was established in 1997 to provide policymakers with information directly from the charters and their supporters on how the law could be amended and implemented to better support the movement. Charter school activists found that Congress continued to be a receptive ground to their ideas and a place they could bring their grievances as several potential charter schools began the process of working with either the Board of Education and the new Public School Chartering Board to obtain their charters and find facility space.

The first two charter schools, Options and the failed Marcus Garvey, were established in late 1996, the first year the new law was in effect.[12] Early charter school concerns centered around the chartering process itself, something which was as new to the chartering entities as it was to the schools, creating a great deal of confusion as to how the process should actually work.

Over the course of 1997, the first full year of charter schools in the District, the Board of Education and the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) approved a large number of applications and before the year was over, six schools were up and running,[13] with a large number of additional schools in the planning stages. Academic year 1998-1999 marked the first year that a full complement of schools, roughly half chartered by each of the two chartering bodies, were up and running. Our study focuses on the experiences of those schools.

Study Design

This study is designed to enhance our understanding of charters schools in the District of Columbia during their first full year of operation. Using semi-structured interviews, site visits, and data collected from secondary sources, the study addresses four broad categories of issues including school financing, facilities, school governance, and student and curricular issues. School finance questions revolve around such issues as the establishment of funding sources, managing costs, and unanticipated expenditures. The facilities category examines factors considered during the selection of the building location, adequacy of the physical facilities, and related costs. School governance information considers the involvement of teachers and parents in school level decisions as well as broader management issues such as accountability, the use of for-profit management firms, and relations between school administrators and school governing boards. The student and curricular category concerns issues such as the size and composition of the student body, school recruitment methods, curriculum methods, and unanticipated student and curricular issues.

During spring and summer of 1999, approximately 70 interviews were conducted with individuals knowledgeable about charter schools in the District of Columbia, including representatives from the two chartering entities, school personnel and parents, and charter school support groups. At the school level, interviews and site visits were conducted in 18 charter schools.[14] To the extent possible, the interviews were held with school principals, individuals knowledgeable about school finances, at least one teacher, one parent, and one member of the board of trustees. Most questions were open-ended, although a few asked respondents to select the best answer from among specific options. Except in a few cases in which individuals objected, interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed.

In order to target questions to different groups, separate interview protocols were created.[15] For example, parents were asked about their reasons for selecting a charter school, parental involvement over the use of school resources, and perceptions of the adequacy of the school facility. Teacher interviews focused on the level of involvement of teachers in school decisions, reasons for teaching in a charter school, and comparisons with previous experiences in regular public or private schools.

In addition to the interviews, additional data on the charter schools were collected from various public, non-profit, and community-based organizations that monitor or support DCPS and the charter schools.[16] Data from these sources include student enrollment and student characteristics (such as race and ethnicity, eligibility for free/reduced lunch, special education services), teacher salaries, and program offerings.

Section One: Patterns of Demand and Supply: Who is Choosing Charters and What Kinds of Schools Are Emerging to Meet Their Needs?

The market model that is so closely tied to arguments in favor of charters and school choice makes predictions about how consumers and suppliers will behave, and about the ways that demand and supply will intersect to generate more efficient and effective outcomes. Market theories predict that well informed parents, dissatisfied with traditional, assigned public schools, will actively explore charter alternatives, and do so primarily based upon the quality of the education they provide. Economic theory also predicts that efficient markets will bring supply into line with demand. If more families are given the means to exercise choice, both charters and traditional schools should find themselves competing more aggressively to serve their customers' needs. If existing schools do not offer the specific programs and educational approaches that parents want, creating an inefficiency in the market, sharp-eyed "educational entrepreneurs" should be ready to fill the gap.

But some critics have questioned whether these predictions hold in the real world of education, where both parents and school administrators have less information and more complex motivations than economic theories typically assume. Instead, they predict that information about schools will be incomplete, misleading, and unequally distributed, and that only the most motivated—and typically the most affluent —families will take advantage of the charter option. They predict that direct racial, religious, and class biases—as well more subtle inter-group differences in culture and values—will lead school choice to create a more segregated and fragmented society. They also caution that if parents care about matters other than educational outcomes—protecting their children from threatening ideas, building self-confidence, giving their children the chance to become friendly with children from wealthier or more influential families, saving money, minimizing inconvenience, getting good grades— schools may emphasize and compete on the basis of those outcomes instead of learning. Critics also warn that markets less easily digest some types of goods than others do and economic theories depend upon a range of assumptions that are never fully realized in real situations. For some types of services, for some types of consumers, and under some settings, suppliers' efforts to maximize their own return may generate profiteering, discrimination, pandering to the rich, fraud, and deception instead of responsiveness and efficiency.[17]

While it is too early to draw definitive conclusions, the District's early experience with charter schools provides some preliminary indications that neither market-theorists nor their critics are right on all counts.

- **Charter schools in the District have found an eager clientele.**

Certainly charters have experienced little trouble attracting students with a minimal level of advertising. Most of the charter schools have filled all of their available seats, and most currently have long waiting lists. Table 1 presents the first-year enrollment projections that schools offered in their original charter applications and compares them to actual enrollments, as reported in October 1998 and as determined by an outside enrollment audit carried out in Spring 1999. About two out of three charter schools met or exceeded their targets.

The charter school law forbids charters from cherry-picking their students and instead mandates that schools fill open positions by lottery if applications exceed demands.[18] By all accounts the market demand for enrollment in charter schools is considerable. While visiting one popular charter school during the summer 1999, we witnessed a parent make an impassioned plea to the principal, expressing her fervent hopes that he would join her in praying that her child would find a place that fall. He calmly told her that it would be inappropriate for him to show any kind of favoritism. After the mother left, he told the researcher that she had offered to make a sizable financial contribution to the school if her child attended—an offer he considered to be an unsubtle attempt to by-pass the lottery process.

Table 1: Enrollment Targets and Actual Enrollment 1998-1999

School Name	Charter Board	October 98 Count	Spring 99 Audited Estimates	Charter Application Targets
Children's Studio	BOE	84	84	72
Community Academy	BOE	300	290	760
Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community	BOE	31	31	60
Integrated Design Electronics Academy	BOE	100	89	150
Next Step	BOE	36	36	24
Options	BOE	99	99	100
Richard Milburn PCS	BOE	132	109	100
Techworld	BOE	147	135	100
Village Learning Center	BOE	120	120	132
World PCS	BOE	59	52	320
Young Technocrats	BOE	459	469	540
BOE Totals		**1567**	**1514**	**2358**
Associates for Renewal	PCSB	NA	50	30
Carlos Rosario	PCSB	400	590	300 *
Cesar Chavez Public Policy Charter	PCSB	60	60	60
Edison Friendship--Chamberlain Campus	PCSB	800	827	NA †
Edison-Friendship--Woodbridge Campus	PCSB	400	391	768
Maya Angelou	PCSB	45	43	50
School for Arts in Learning	PCSB	64	58	72
SEED PCS	PCSB	40	39	40
Washington Mathematics Science Technol	PCSB	200	198	175
PCSB Totals		**2009**	***2256**	**1495**
All Charters		**3576**	**3770**	**3853**

*135 Full-Time Equivalent † Edison-Friendship had originally planned to open one campus

Another indication of the intensity of demand is the angry response that has come from parents when chartering authorities have closed, or threatened to close, existing schools. Although the school had been open less than two weeks, parents at the Kwame Nkrumah International School angrily protested in September 1999 when the DC Board of Education claimed that the school had not been approved to open.

- **Charter schools come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and most offer some special emphasis or theme in an effort to distinguish themselves from traditional public schools and from other charters.**

The term "charter school" serves as a broad umbrella, and nestling within its shadow are a wide range of institutional forms and educational visions. As pro-market supporters might predict, charters are tailoring themselves in a manner that distinguishes them as a clear alternative to public schools. Table 2 summarizes the themes and organizational forms that characterize the schools in operation during 1998-99 academic school year and those that opened in Fall 1999.

The diversity of offerings is quite striking along certain dimensions. In curriculum and teaching style, the schools range from those that offer a broad liberal arts curriculum to those emphasizing special themes, such as math and science, public policy, or the arts. Some have adopted teaching styles centered on creativity and student-guided learning; others stress personal disciplines and a back-to-basics orientation. Several place technical and vocational skills at the center of their mission and are focused on the goal of getting their students into the workforce. Figure 4 illustrates some of the ways DC charter schools vary according to curriculum and target audience. We found that accurately assigning a charter school to a particular category of curriculum was surprisingly difficult. Part of the reason for this is that charter schools in practice do not always look like the schools that their brochures and charter applications described due to a changing and dynamic landscape. Another reason is that research and theorizing about charter schools is too new and immature to have developed a clear and universally recognized typology of charter schools. Because we

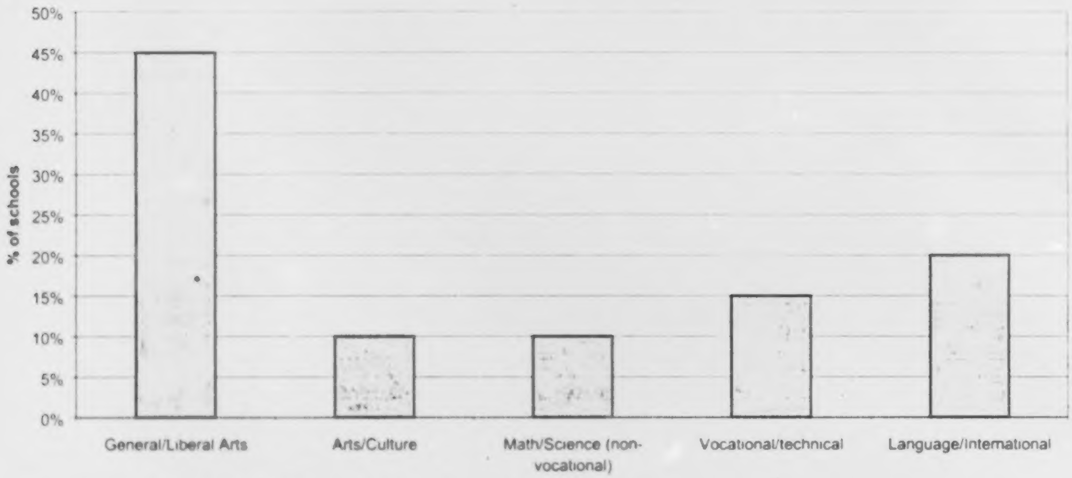
Table 2: Characteristics of DC Charter Schools, 1999

School Name	Chartering Body	Planned grade configuration	Expected enrollment, 1999/00	Themes
Operational 98/99				
Associates for Renewal in Education	PCSB	Ages 14-22	50	Enable young people involved in the juvenile justice system to find responsible ways to meet their needs so they can improve their self-image, behave appropriately, develop critical thinking and problem solving skills and get a high school diploma.
Carlos Rosano	PCSB	Ages 16-60	500	GED for at-risk and adult ESL students
Cesar Chavez Public Policy Charter	PCSB	Grades 9-12	120	Preparing minority students for further education and public policy careers
Children's Studio	BOE	Ages 3-11	96	Arts as Education
Community Academy	BOE	K-12	615	Extended school day and year; community-based.
Edison-Friendship--2 campuses	PCSB	K-12	2028	Edison college preparatory curriculum; families receive a home computer.
Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom	BOE	K-5	65	Foreign language immersion and community service
Integrated Design Electronics Academy	BOE	Grades 9-12	125	Career preparation; JROTC training.
Maya Angelou	PCSB	Grades 9-12	65	Integrating the world of work into the traditional academic setting by having students take responsibility for a restaurant, and engaging in other workplace experiences.
Next Step	BOE	Age 16+	48	GED for teens; ESL
Options	BOE	Grades 5-8	125	Alternative learning environment for at-risk students
Richard Milburn	BOE	Grades 9-12	200	Academic H.S. for at-risk students
School for Arts in Learning SAIL	PCSB	K-5	80	Arts-based education for children with learning disabilities
SEED PCS	PCSB	Grades 7-12	70	Residential college preparatory school for at risk inner-city children
Techworld	BOE	Grades 9-12	300	Math, science, technology
Village Learning Center	BOE	PreK-8	240	Whole-child education
Washington Mathematics Science Technology	PCSB	Grades 9-12	200	Integrating math and science instruction with technology, for college-bound students. Modern Red Schoolhouse academic standards
World PCS	BOE	Ages 4-18	60	International Baccalaureate
Young Technocrats	BOE	Charter revoked		Math, science, technology
Open Fall 1999				
Booker T. Washington PCS	BOE	Grades 9-12	250	Preparation for careers in building and construction
Edison, Blow-Pierce campus	PCSB	Grades 6-8	600	Continuation of Edison's college preparatory curriculum
Hospitality Public Charter High School	PCSB	Grades 9-12	100	Training for high-skill careers in the hospitality industry.Paid internships, industry related technology systems training, student learning projects and mentors
Hyde PCS	BOE	Grades 7-12	240	Character-based, college preparatory curriculum
Ideal Academy PCS	BOE	PreK-6	135	Holistic education with math and reading emphasis
Kwame Nkrumah International PCS*	BOE	K-12	408	College preparatory multi-cultural school with emphasis on world languages,computer technology, and science.
New Vistas Academy PCS	BOE	Grades 7-12	150	Innovative curriculum for at-risk students
Robert L. Johnson Academy PCS	PCSB	PreK-5	540	Performing and communication arts
Roots PCS	BOE	Ages 3-13	60	Culturally-relevant, African-centered curriculum
Southeast Academy PCS	PCSB	K-adult	700	Extended school year and individualized education plans

* This school opened and was subsequently closed by the BOE in Fall 1999

SOURCES: Adapted from Friends of Choice in Urban Schools; Charter School Resource Center; Individual school materials were interested in how charters present themselves to the public, and how they differentiate themselves from the offerings available in traditional public schools, for the purposes of Figure 4, we focused on the short descriptions that charters offered in promotional materials and how they characterized themselves to us in interviews, rather than by an intense study of what actually goes on in the classroom.

Figure 4
Curriculum Focus



- *About half of DC public charter schools offer a general liberal arts curriculum that is not sharply differentiated in subject focus or pedagogical theory from that offered in DCPS.*

Although making reliable comparisons to other states is difficult, in this respect it appears that the charter movement in DC is somewhat less likely to emphasize some form of curricular innovation as a way to differentiate themselves from traditional public schools. To place this in perspective, one study of charters in Colorado, Massachusetts, and Michigan found that an average of 23 percent of the charters in those three states offered a general curriculum. [19]

- *For DC charters that* ***do*** *identify a curriculum focus, the emphasis is more on a particular subject theme (e.g. the arts, math/science, foreign language) than either a "back-to-basics" or an "alternative/progressive" approach.*

About 40% of DC charters emphasize the arts, non-vocational math/science, or foreign languages. (Figure 4 illustrates the various emphases of charter schools in DC.) This compares to only about 5% in Colorado, Massachusetts, and Michigan. In contrast, an average of 16 percent of the charters in Colorado, Massachusetts, and Michigan stressed back-to the basics, and about 40% stressed an alternative pedagogical style (such as Montessori or Paideia); none of the DC charters operating in 1998-99 clearly staked their identity on these approaches. [20]

Another way to categorize charter school offerings is by the breadth or narrowness of their target populations. Some schools aim for a narrow and sharply defined group of students, such as those who are have learning disabilities, are "at-risk" or are adults seeking vocational skills or a G.E.D. At the other extreme, some schools target a very general audience, basically aiming for the "typical student" who may simply be dissatisfied with traditional public schools. In the middle are "theme" schools; these schools have some sort of specialty that is likely to appeal to some students more than others.

- **About three of ten charters schools in DC target a niche audience. This may reduce the extent to which the charters are directly competing with DCPS.**

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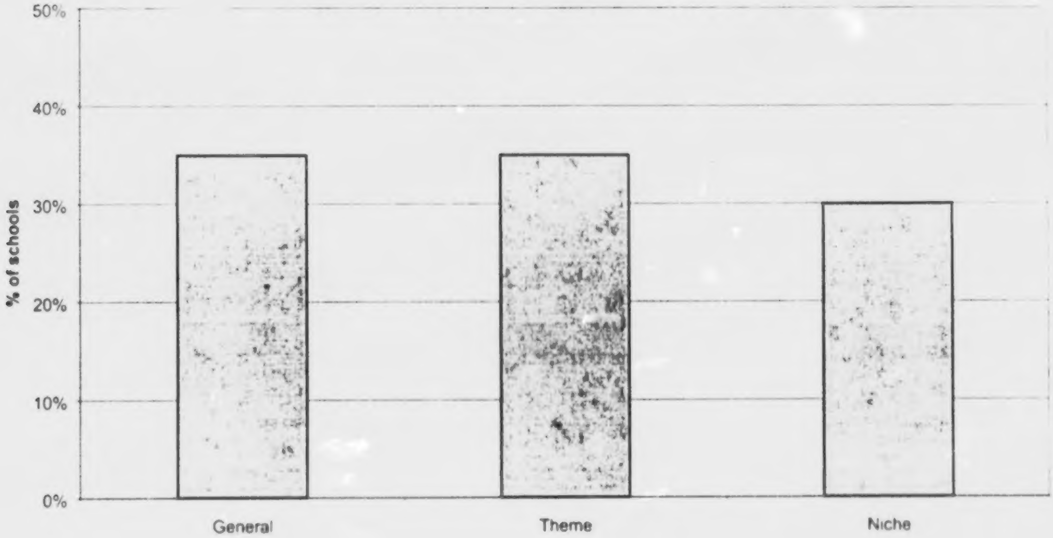
Niche schools are less threatening to traditional public schools for several reasons. First, by defining their target audiences narrowly, niche schools do not present the same real or symbolic challenge as charters that go after the core of the traditional public school clientele. In essence, they do not compete in the District-wide market for students. Secondly, the particular niches that charter schools identify often include students who are especially difficult or costly to educate; in some instances the traditional system may be pleased to see this audience siphoned off. Third, niche schools tend to be small schools; even if they succeed they are less likely to divert many students or much public revenue away from the core public school system. Figure 5 illustrates the proportion of schools that target general, theme, and niche audiences.

Figure 5
Breadth of Charter Schools' Target Audience



Charter schools differ also in basic organizational forms. While most offer fairly conventional grade configurations, some, like Associates for Renewal, have dispensed with the traditional grade structure. While most are in operation for a fairly standard school day, some have extended days. Maya Angelou, for example, is open from 9:30 am to 8 pm on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursdays, from 1-8 pm on Wednesdays, and from 9:30-4:30 on Fridays. Most have adopted a standard 180-day school year, but several have extended that substantially. Cesar Chavez has a 221-day school year and Maya Angelou is in session for 240 days. Perhaps the most striking departure from the standard schedule and configuration is SEED, which offers a 24-hour residential school for its students.

- *In light of the hope that charter schools might become "laboratories of experimentation" that incubate new ideas that will gradually be reintroduced into the traditional education system,*[21] *it is a little ironic to note that several of the existing charter schools had been part of, or closely associated with, DCPS before the charter law gave them a new alternative.*

Options originally had a contract with DCPS to work with troubled middle school students. Children's Studio for many years was funded as a child development center by the DC Department of Human Services, and later worked "in residence" with DCPS at Cleveland School and as part of DCPS Arts & Community Collaborative. The Carlos Rosario School was a preeminent adult education center funded by DCPS before closing. Some of the founders of Washington, Math, Science, and Technology previously worked for Ballou Senior High School. Similarly, IDEA grew out of a charter school incorporated inside of the Phelps High School.

At this point, however, the charter alternatives are too new and unsettled to support a claim that their differences are substantially sharper and well defined. Moreover, it is an open question whether all charters will be able to sustain the innovative approaches that they proposed at the chartering stage. In some instances high expectations have been partially deflated as charter school teachers and administrators have confronted the fact that their students need substantial help with the basics of reading, writing, and math before they can cope with the more ambitious curriculum they hoped to implement. In addition, the school theme creates a need for teachers with special skills that cannot easily be found in the tight education job-market. And, as elaborated below, parents' may act as a conservative force, pressuring schools to scale back innovative practices that do not fit their expectations about what a schools is "supposed" to do.

- **From the perspective of DC parents, the specific pedagogical and organizational distinctions among the charter schools may be less significant than the simple fact that they represent something different from their children's current schools.**

Advocates for charter schools claim that it is the capacity to provide an alternative approach to education that will draw in students and parents. The parents we interviewed tended to be among those most active and involved in the schools—presumably those who would be more attuned than the average parent to the school's special mission and themes. Yet even among that select group we found that many parents were drawn less by the innovative curriculum than by several factors presumably central to *any* good school: good and caring teachers; an open and supportive attitude toward children and their families; and emphasis on achievement. In tandem with this finding, its also important to note that we found little evidence that parents were systematically collecting and comparing information on different public and charter schools in order to find the "best" school. Rather, very few of the parents said they had "shopped around," and most knew little about other charter school options in the District. The fact that parents may be more responsive to the supportiveness of the environment than to program innovation and special themes challenges some expectations. If it is not variety that parents are demanding, competition among charters may not spark the pedagogical innovation that proponents envision.

If parents want a combination of nurturing and good test scores, and if charters provide those, most people would call that a success story, even if the result is a more homogenous educational landscape than some had imagined. What is unclear, however, is what will happen if parental traditionalism comes into direct conflict with the innovative, missionary zeal that animates some of the charter founders.

- **To the extent that it is nurturing and community-oriented, and therefore attractive to parents, one advantage that some of the charter schools offer is their small size.**

Figure 6 compares the size of charter schools to their counterparts in DCPS. In Fall 1998, nearly 50 percent of all charter schools held fewer than 100 students compared to fewer than 1 percent of DCPS schools.[22] Only about 25 percent of charter schools currently have 300 or more students, compared to about 85 percent of DCPS schools.

  - *But the small size advantage enjoyed by charter schools is subject to erosion over time.*

One reason for this is that some charter schools are scheduled to grow substantially. Many of the new public charter schools enrolled one grade level of students during their first year and plan to add grade levels in subsequent years, potentially growing to enrollment levels similar to DCPS schools. Moreover, while only about 1 in 4 current charter schools is large (enrolling 300 or more students), those few schools account for over two-thirds of all charter school students.

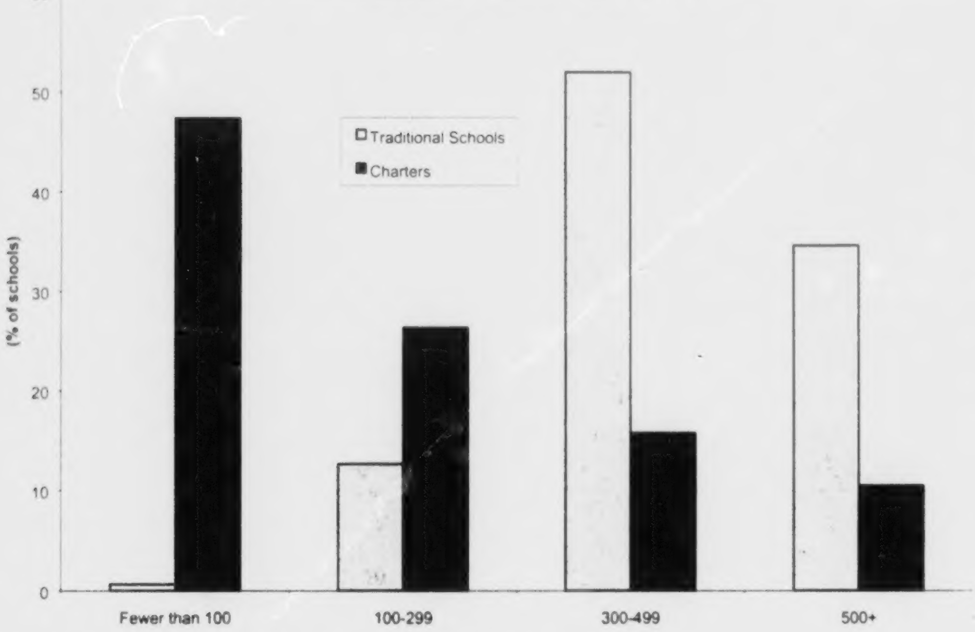


Figure 6
Size of School (enrollment, Fall 1998), DCPS and Charter Schools
(% of schools in various size groupings)

- **For those who fear that charters will cater to an already-favored elite, the evidence from DC to date is generally reassuring.**

One of the nagging concerns about the charter notion is the possibility that charter schools will cream off the top from the pool of local students, leaving the children with the greatest needs locked in a conventional public system that is even more depleted and isolated than currently. The following figures present some very basic information on the racial and ethnic composition, eligibility for free or reduced price lunches (a rough indicator of economic need), presence of students with disabilities, and students with limited (LEP) or no (NEP) English proficiency in the charter schools and in DCPS.[23]

Figure 7
Student Characteristics, Charters vs. DCPS
(average per school)

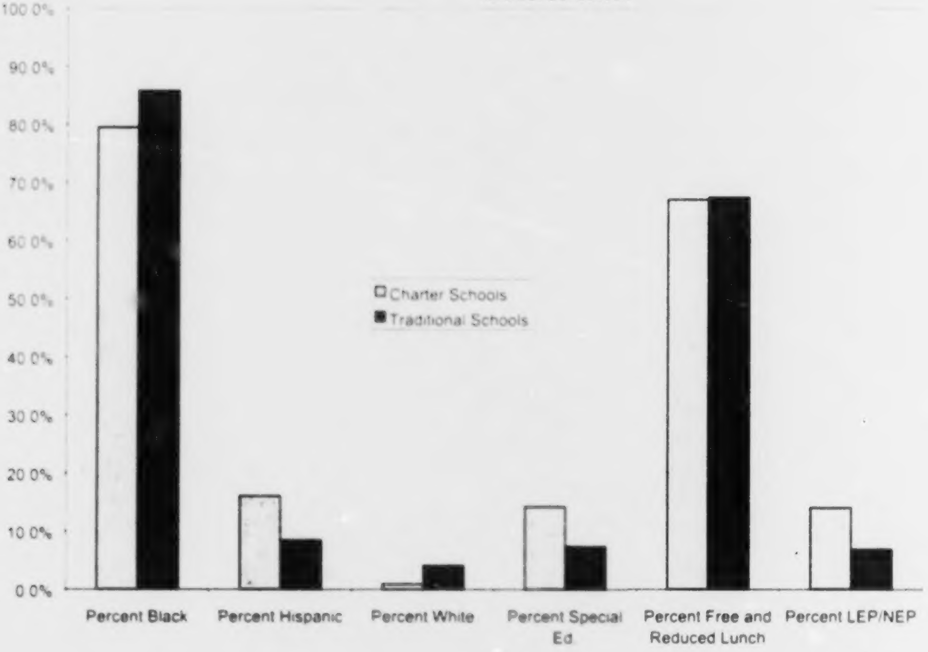
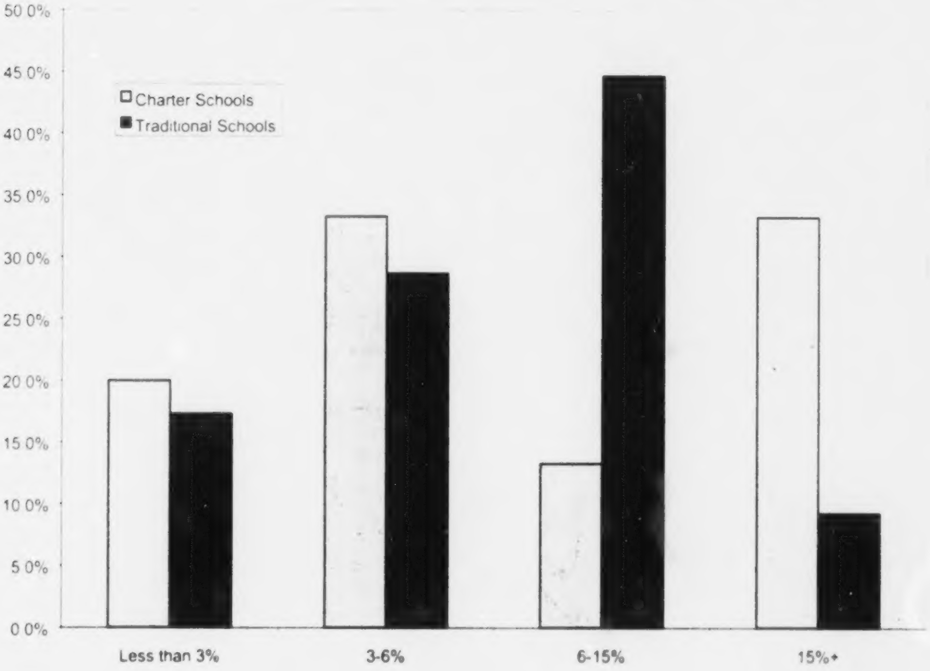


Figure 7 shows that enrollment by race and ethnicity is slightly different in public charter schools than DCPS schools. Public charter schools serve a smaller percentage of Black and white students, but a substantially larger percentage of Hispanic students. Here, as elsewhere, the averages across schools can be misleading. Six charter schools have quite substantial proportions of Hispanic students 20% or more), but ten charter schools had fewer than 1%. The percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch is nearly identical in both types of schools.

Figure 8
Distribution of Special Education Students, Charters vs. DCPS



- *The fact that charter schools are serving African-American and Latino students, many of them poor, does not necessarily put to rest concerns about creaming and* possible inequities.

Studies of school choice, in both public and private systems, have found evidence that families of choosers differ in important ways from non-choosers, even when their race and income status are similar. Families that have gone to the trouble to explore options and pursue them tend—on average—to have higher educational aspirations and somewhat more stable family situations. For example, in San Antonio, where there is a private scholarship program limited to those who qualify for federal free or reduced price lunches, parents taking advantage of the program are more educated, have fewer children, are more likely to be part of a two-parent household, and are more likely to be Anglo than are non-choosers in the public schools.[24] Moreover, there are at least some indications that DC charter schools may be using informal methods to screen out some children whose family situations may be less favorable.

"Now if a child goes into the lottery with different questions, like red flag questions, they've been repeatedly suspended for fighting, perhaps they are not a good candidate ... So we'll make a home visit before the lottery just to make sure that people are clear." – A Charter School Teacher

"Every student and parent goes through an intensive welcoming interview. And an example would be junior ROTC. It is mandatory for all of our students. If the parent is against it, or if the student is against it and the parent backs the student up, they know right there in the interview that this is not the place to come."— A Charter School Founder/Administrator

A potentially serious unease related to creaming concerns students with moderate to severe disabilities. Nation-wide, as in the District, there are a number of charters schools that specialize in serving this challenging population. Even including schools that specialize in serving special populations, however, there are indications that charter schools overall may under-serve students with disabilities and limited English proficiency (LEP). Based on reports from the schools, 8.4% of students in the nation's charter schools nationally had disabilities, compared to 11.3% of all public school students in those states with operating charter schools. In six states the proportion of students with disabilities in charter schools was substantially lower (more than five percentage points) than in those states' public schools; only in Ohio was the percentage in charter schools substantially higher than in the public schools.[25] Nationally, charter schools seem to be just as likely as traditional public schools to serve students with limited English. In 1998-99, 9.9% of students in the nation's charter schools nationally had limited English proficiency, compared to 9.8% of students for all public schools. But there is some evidence that the newer charter schools are less likely to serve LEP students; almost 13 percent of the students in charter schools surveyed in 1996-7 had limited English proficiency.[26]

This most recent national survey, which includes the District along with the other states that offer charter programs, identifies D.C. as being one of only two jurisdictions in which charter schools serve a substantially higher proportion of LEP students than the traditional system. Our analysis supports this, but also reveals that this is attributable to the actions of a small number of schools rather than a characteristic of charter schools in general. Figure 8, which is based on averages across schools, shows that the District's public charter schools tend to serve a larger percentage of students with disabilities than do the traditional public schools. But this can be misleading. In fact, a few, generally small, charter schools serve very high proportions of special education students, while most serve far fewer.

- **While DC charters are serving many low-income DC students, some low-income wards may be under-served.**

While charter schools do not appear to be steering away from low-income and minority students, they may, to some extent, be steering clear from some sections of the city where the needs are especially great. During the 1998-99 school year, no charters were operating in Ward 7 or Ward 8. These are the two wards of the city with the lowest median income and the highest proportion of residents who are African American. Whether this is a long-term trend or not is uncertain, however. In Fall 1999, Robert Louis Johnson PCS opened in Ward 7 and Southeast Academy PCS opened in Ward 8. That still leaves Wards 7 and 8 somewhat under-represented. While this suggests that there might be some reticence of charter founders to locate in the very poorest areas, that is certainly not an indication that they prefer to target the wealthiest neighborhoods. To the contrary, the only ward not yet to have a charter school located within its boundaries is Ward 3, the whitest and wealthiest of the city's eight wards. The map in Figure 9 visually situates charter schools operating in Spring 1999 by ward and Table 3 illustrates school location by board and ward.

- **Rather than selecting locations based on the characteristics of the families in the surrounding neighborhoods, charter schools so far have been locating primarily in response to pragmatic considerations of building availability and access.**

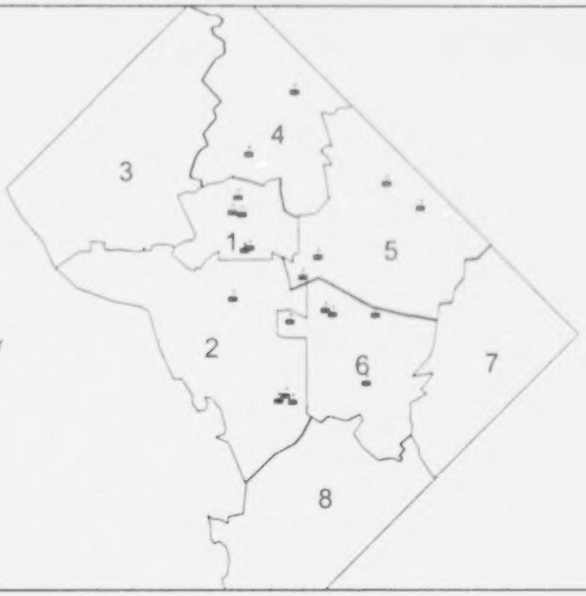


Figure 9

Location of DC Charter Schools, By Ward, Spring 1999

Statistical analysis of the location of all charter schools, including those opening in Fall 1998, shows that three of the most important predictors of whether a charter school will locate in a given neighborhood are the presence of a metro station, location in or near the downtown area, and the presence of a vacant public school building.[27]

The first two of these suggest that charter schools consider access by students and their families to be important consideration in choosing a site. Vacant school buildings are attractive sites for charter schools because they are already configured for educational purposes, because potential "customers" may be quicker to recognize these *as* schools, and—probably most significantly—because existing law and practice make leasing and purchasing arrangements for these buildings much more attractive than could be found on the private commercial market, a factor we explain in the next section of this report.

Table 3: Charter Density by Ward and Ward Traits

	Predominantly White	Racially & Economically Diverse			Predominantly Black, middle SES		Predominantly Black, low SES	
	Ward 3	Ward 1	Ward 2	Ward 6	Ward 4	Ward 5	Ward 7	Ward 8
No. census tracts	18	22	32	28	23	25	22	22
Charter location								
No. of tracts with a charter	0	4	4	4	2	4	0	0
% of tracts with a charter	0%	18%	13%	14%	9%	16%	0%	0%
No. of tracts with a BOE charter	0	2	1	2	2	2	0	0
% of tracts with a BOE charter	0%	9%	3%	7%	9%	8%	0%	0%
No. of tracts with a PCSB charter	0	2	3	2	0	2	0	0
% of tracts with a PCSB charter	0%	9%	9%	7%	0%	8%	0%	0%

Section Two: Funding and Facilities

As might be expected, funding has emerged as probably the most complex and, particularly in the case of facilities, politically charged issue in the entire charter school program. The most recent national data suggests that the two most common implementation problems that charter schools report are lack of start-up funds (reported by 48.5% of schools) and inadequate operating funds (37.4%).[28] From the standpoint of the schools, the primary issues revolve around *level, reliability, and cash flow*. On the other hand, government funding authorities see the key issues as *efficiency*, *management*, and *affordability*.

Some early proponents of charter schools promised that charter schools could substantially reduce the per pupil cost of public education, by eliminating inefficiencies and waste associated with large, bureaucratized traditional school systems. But proponents also have complained that states have been too stingy in their financing, and that to get a fair shot at success, charter schools need adequate public support, especially in their start-up period. They especially have complained about the insufficiency of funding for the leasing, purchase, or rehabilitating of buildings to house charter schools. Critics of charter schools, for their part, have worried that charter schools will siphon needed funds away from already struggling traditional systems.

- **Public per-pupil operating budget funding for DC charter schools is among the most generous in the nation.**

Similar to traditional public schools, charter schools around the country are funded by a combination of local, state, and federal resources. Yet while most schools nationwide receive general operating support from the local and state public education system according to the number of students attending each schools (i.e., based on average daily attendance), the amount of support available to charter schools differs substantially from state to state. In some states, such as Arizona, Arkansas, Missouri, and the District of Columbia, charter school statutes require that charter schools receive operating funds equal to those made available to traditional public schools. In other states, public finding for charters can be lower or, much more rarely, higher. For example, in Colorado and New Hampshire charter schools receive as little as 80 percent of the per-pupil operating revenues, while in Connecticut state charters get 105 percent of foundation level aid per student and local charters negotiate their level of aid with the local board.[29]

The Fiscal Year 1999 budget for DC public charter schools was $12.2 million and the proposed FY 2000 appropriation is $28.9 million, reflecting a substantial increase in enrollment growth. Public charter schools and DCPS schools are funded through General Fund allocations and rely on a "uniform per student funding formula" to determine the amount of funding.[30] This foundation level is calculated based on enrollments, taking into account the fact that some types of students require higher expenditures than others. For FY 2000 and subsequent years, the basic foundation grant is $5,500 per student, subject to amendment by the Mayor and City Council.[31] The amount of the foundation grant is then adjusted to reflect grade levels and students with special needs. Grades K-5, for example, are weighted at 1.16, increasing the total per pupil allocation to $6,380. Supplemental funding is also provided for special education, bilingual education services, summer school, and full-time residence at a residential school. The weights range from .10 for summer school to 1.73 for more intensive special education services.

Federal funding provides charter schools with additional financial assistance for at-risk (Title I) and special education students and other small categorical education grants that provide support for capital and instructional development. Federal resources are either channeled through the state education agency distributing categorical funds or are provided directly from the federal government upon acceptance of grant proposals. One recent example of the use of federal grants is the receipt of a $2.6 million Safe School / Healthy Students Grant awarded to 16 of the existing charter schools. [32]

Comparisons with other states are difficult, partly because charter school spending in many states depends upon combinations of decisions at both the state and district levels. We have found no comprehensive data reporting per pupil funding on a state-by-state basis. But several factors suggest that DC's funding may be among the most generous. First, many states allow charter schools to receive operating funds at a rate below that available to traditional public schools; DC requires that per pupil funding for charter schools equal the average for DCPS. Secondly, DC generally spends more per pupil than is the case in other school systems; pegging charter funds to DCPS spending levels, therefore, is setting them at a relatively high standard. Third, unlike most places, DC now provides additional funding explicitly to support capital expenditures in charter schools. Although this was not included in the original Congressional legislation, federal law now provides charter schools with a facility allowance that is to be based on the average of DCPS per pupil facility costs from FY 1999 and FY 2000 multiplied by the number of students estimated to be attending each charter school.[33] The District sets the actual per pupil facility payment.[34] Also, since 1997, charter legislation in the District stipulates that new public charter schools can borrow against their projected allocation from a revolving loan fund. Bi-annual disbursements from the District are reduced by the advances, so that the balance is paid off at the end of the first school year. The revolving loan fund replaces an earlier plan that gave new charters an early disbursement to assist with start-up costs. During the 1998-99 school year, there was approximately $3.5 million available in the loan fund; 11 public charter schools took advantage of these resources, borrowing anywhere from $25,000 to over $400,000.[35]

- **Nonetheless, charter school administrators insist that this amount is insufficient for them to meet their expenses without compromising on the educational mission they have define for themselves.**

One of the critical issues for charter schools in most states is the lack of available funding for start up costs. Only a handful of states such as Arizona, Minnesota, and Georgia provide start-up funds, ranging from $5,000 up to $100,000.[36] In Michigan, charter schools are eligible to borrow money through the municipal bond authority.[37] The federal government also provides small grants to assist with these expenses. Unfortunately, even with some financial support from governmental sources, charter schools in most jurisdictions still lack adequate financial assistance. The problem is particularly challenging for newly created charter schools that require resources to hire and train personnel, purchase equipment and instructional supplies, and secure and renovate a facility.

> "If the programs of choice were better funded, we would be able to do a lot more, especially for meeting target, meeting populations as well."—A Charter School Administrator

Our findings suggest that some public charter schools are struggling to find adequate start-up funding for personnel, equipment and facilities. This may be due to the competition for funding or the lack of personnel to aggressively engage in fundraising activities. In one school where there has been little attention paid to raising outside support, students lack adequate equipment to learn how to assemble and operate machinery, which is the crux of the school's mission. One parent, who worked for the U.S. Government, described how she had been able to secure a number of computers her department was replacing and provided them to the school her son was attending.

> "I also scavenge for them [the school]. Whenever they throw anything away here [at her office], I get it. A couple of months ago, I was going to lunch and they had thrown away a mountain of software, brand new, still wrapped, C++, Visual, Basic, tons of Word Perfect, Lotus. So ... I went upstairs and got boxes and loaded it up and took it all up to the school. Then what I couldn't carry away, I called the Job Corps Center and told them come and get this stuff for the kids. So I scavenge."—A Charter School Parent

- **In addition, practical issues relating to the calculation and timing of disbursements can generate cash-flow problems for struggling schools.**

Public charter schools receive two payments from the District. By October 15, 75 percent of the total annual payment is disbursed. The sum of this disbursement is based on the actual enrollment reported by the school to the Mayor and the Board of Education by September 15.[38] The remaining balance of funds to a public charter school is disbursed by May 1 with the sum adjusted to reflect changes in student enrollment. For every student who has withdrawn from, or dropped out of, a public charter school as of March 15, the annual amount payable to the school for that student is reduced by 50 percent. For every additional student enrolled since the September 15 count, the school receives an additional payment of 50 percent of the annual payment. Schools also receive additional funds for students with disabilities not counted initially.

The difficulty surrounding these funding issues becomes apparent when it is seen how the primary funding issues for public charter schools are intertwined with the actions of public authorities. For example, the public charter school statute specifies a funding formula and disbursement schedule for schools that is based on *projected* school enrollment levels, grade levels, and student needs that could result in inadequate funding levels for public charter schools if actual enrollment counts exceed projections. If this were to happen, the DC government would have to make up the difference in funding after the school year has begun, and could shift funds away from DCPS schools. When, or if, the funding for DCPS schools reaches a critical minimum level, administrators will be forced to make difficult decisions regarding funding DCPS and public charter schools.

This issue is particularly problematic when Congress and the President, who have the final say over the District funds, fail to agree upon a budget for the new fiscal year, as happened in both the 1998 and 1999 appropriations processes. When this occurs, public charter schools, whose enrollments are growing faster than DCPS schools, may have difficulty operating on prior year funding levels. It is partially for this reason that supporters for charter schools encouraged Congress to create a charter school revolving fund in 1997 to provide temporary financial relief for charters should funds cease to flow. Without this funding mechanism, new charter schools would not get any money at all when Congress relies on a continuing resolution to keep the government open. Under the continuing resolution, existing schools are funded at 75 percent of the previous year's level, but new schools, because they were not in existence during the previous fiscal year, would be left out in the cold. The revolving fund provides $1,552 per pupil to new schools, intended to tide them over until Congress approves the new budget and it is signed into law.

With enrollment levels in public charter schools expected grow, it is unclear how schools will be able to meet their financial responsibilities without sacrificing their educational missions. Luckily for both DCPS and public charter schools, the size of the elementary and secondary education budget has grown substantially in recent years, easing, at least for the time being, the potential for intense competition between the two types of schools.

- **Securing a school facility has been one of the most difficult problems for newly created public charter schools in DC as well as nationally.**

In addition to having adequate funds for facilities, securing a facility is one of the most important start-up issues for new charters. Although there is some federal money available for capital projects, and a few states and the District of Columbia provide per pupil facility funds, it is not enough for many new schools. To make the most out of limited resources, charter schools in many states and the District can be found in affordable rented retail and office facilities, former churches, non profit spaces and sharing facilities. One out of every three charter schools nationally cite "inadequate facilities" as a problem, making this the fourth most common implementation problem.[39]

Aware that the acquisition of facilities has presented one of the greatest hurdles to both charter approval and school start-up, Congress required the District Public School System to give a special preference to charter schools when leasing or selling vacant public school buildings. Only Delaware and Michigan have similar provisions, which explicitly grant preference for leasing public buildings to charter schools.

- **Even though federal law stipulates that public charter schools are to be given preference for unused public education facilities, many of the schools have reported a great deal of difficulty in negotiating with DCPS for the right to purchase or lease eligible school buildings.**

> "[Finding adequate facilities is] also a problem. We are very, very much aware that there are a number of half empty D.C. public school facilities where you have a building that is capable of holding 1,000 or more children that may have 300- or 400 children. D.C. Public Schools need to go through an additional consolidation and make decent campuses available to charter schools. For instance, I very much had in mind where I would like for our academy to be, and that is I really think it is important for them to be the most successful, they do need to be located in near Northeast Washington. The Taft Junior High School was empty. Well, boom, they [DCPS] ran and stuck something in there. They said, oh, we are putting special education in there."—A Charter School Founder and Board Member

More than any other single issue, the need for facilities in which to house charter schools has been the impetus for political action by the schools themselves, and it is this issue that has closely linked them to those local organizations dedicated to lobbying federal and local government on their behalf. No other building serves a charter nearly as well as one originally designed to be a school. Since the charters lacked sufficient funds to cover the cost of constructing their own facilities, they turned to buildings that already existed. Several years ago the District had started closing down schools for which there was an insufficient number of students, or buildings that were simply deemed to be unsafe. While the Emergency Board of Trustees had directed DCPS to sell off these facilities where possible, by 1997 the school system still retained title to most of its empty school buildings. Not only did the fledgling charter schools see these buildings as the perfect solution to their dilemma, they felt that as "public" schools themselves they had a legitimate right to these facilities. However, in many cases charter schools were not able to secure an agreement they felt was acceptable from

DCPS on the disposition of facilities. Meetings with the Emergency Board of Trustees did not produce the hoped for results either.

Charter school organizations and their supporters discussed with us their frustration in dealing with DCPS, making bids on school facilities, only to find them abruptly removed from the market or sold to bidders not involved in education. In spite of the congressional mandate, it appears that DCPS lacks a policy to deal with public charter schools. There are many examples to illustrate the problems public charter schools faced during the 1998-99 school year. For example, several schools opening in the Fall of 1998 anticipated being housed in a DCPS facility only to be told a few days before opening that they would not be able to use the facility. Other public charter schools, which were housed in DCPS facilities during the academic year, were told to relocate at the end of the school year. Public charter school personnel felt neglected by DCPS facility staff as communication broke down between some schools and DCPS personnel. Worst of all, several schools managed to acquire DCPS facilities they understood to be in usable condition, only to discover, days before classes began, that the buildings had been stripped of even the most basic of hardware, containing leaking pipes and damaged roofs. The high, unbudgeted cost of repairs at these schools has nearly crippled several new schools even before they had begun.

❖ **Frustrated with their apparent failure in dealing with local government, charter school advocates turned back to those who had been so willing to help them before, and the Congress responded.**

In the appropriations legislation for fiscal year 1998, Congress added several critical provisions in support of the charter schools. First and foremost, the legislation required the Board of Trustees to guarantee a preference for charter schools in the disposition of vacant DCPS facilities. Second, Congress increased the per-pupil allotment to the charter schools with the additional amount to be used for lease payments or repairs for the facility they were currently in. The legislation also created a revolving fund which provided limited support to charter schools in their first year of operation should they not be able to meet their financial obligations under the standard method of payment. However, in the case of the charter school preference for DCPS facilities, Congress simply laid down a directive without specifying how this preference was to be provided, in spite of the urgings of the charter schools for a clear and precise law. The refusal to do so may have been a sign that Congress was starting to consider returning an element of home rule to the District and permit local authorities to figure out the specifics of how to dispose of their property. Either way, the charter schools and their advocacy organizations have been forced to once again go to District authorities to negotiate the lease or purchase of empty school facilities.

- **While the charter schools see this as a case of indifference, incompetence or harassment, it is important to remember that there are legitimate reasons why local public authorities might be wary about transferring DCPS properties to new and untested entities at highly discounted prices.**

The fact that DCPS currently has unused and under-utilized space does not necessarily mean that such space will not be needed by the system in the future. And both the school system and the city overall have some responsibility for ensuring that overall fiscal needs are taken into consideration when disposing of public properties; when market rents and sales prices are greater than those that would be provided by the charters, disposal at discounted prices means that local taxpayers will indirectly be forced to pay the difference.

- **Finding the right balance between the facilities needs of the charters and competing local interests in the disposition of public properties is a challenging task that is likely to fall, increasingly, to local authorities.**

Predicting the course of Home Rule in the District is a hazardous undertaking. But with a new Mayor, a balanced local budget, and current plans by the Control Board to begin shifting powers back to the Board of education, it seems likely that Congress will be taking more of a back seat. With this diminished interest from federal lawmakers and greatly invigorated attention from the City Council, charters have refocused much of their efforts on working with local authorities to work out their future. In the fiscal year 2000 appropriations legislation, Congress has decided to strike the sunset provisions on the program, providing charters with a sense of permanence. Responding somewhat to the on-going frustration of the charter schools over the disposition of facilities, Congress has promised to take action, but only if the District government refuses to do so. This is an unlikely event since the current chairman of the Council Education Committee has taken a considerable interest in finding some sort of solution to the facilities issue. Whatever the future role of charters in the District may be, its political future appears to lie with the re-empowered local government instead of the federal lawmakers who originally gave the program life.

In the meantime, DCPS has taken steps to remedy the facilities problem by hiring of a new Director of Facilities Management. This individual appears to be interested in developing a policy to handle public charter school facility requests, and his early interactions with the charter schools have been well received.

Despite the problems many schools have experienced, a number of the charters managed to find or create attractive, well equipped, and student friendly facilities.

Indeed, our interviews found that most respondents found their current facilities either very adequate or moderately adequate. They were especially satisfied with their current locations in terms of accessibility and safety; 90 percent indicated that accessibility was very adequate, and 70 percent said the same about safety. Respondents were less satisfied with building appearance, layout, and space. Only four out of ten, for example, thought their facilities had very adequate space, and three out of ten thought the space was not adequate at all. Several parents spontaneously mentioned to us their wish that for more recreational space and facilities.

- **If charter schools are going to revolutionize education policy in the US, then, the preliminary evidence from DC is that this will not involve the substantial cost-savings that some envisioned.**

Some proponents of charter schools suggest that the charter school movement will increase the level of efficiency in resource use as schools are freed from the micromanagement endemic in public elementary and secondary education systems. They also believe that because schools are held accountable by consumer demand, school managers will have a greater motivation than traditional schools to maximize efficiency and take advantage of economies of scale. However, our observations suggest that public charter schools in the District are not recognizing large cost savings to date for DCPS or the schools themselves. Rather than ratifying the claim that quality education can be delivered at bargain prices, DC charters are echoing traditional public schools in their insistence that good education for inner-city children requires spending more, not less.

Many public charter schools that we observed had a front office staff, which includes school leadership and administrative assistants, comparable in size to DCPS schools.

Public charter schools also utilize counseling staff, both full and part time, including guidance counselors, psychologists, social workers, and special education consultants. Public charter schools also create more administrative activity at the district level. DCPS has had to manage the increased administrative responsibilities associated with public charter schools including facility and procurement management and student testing and evaluation. In addition, the District government disperses resources and monitors expenditures for public charter schools.

- **Because the per-pupil allocation is insufficient to allow them to meet their current costs, charter schools are forced to pursue one or more options, each with their own set of potential risks and benefits.**

There are four outlets that public charter schools potentially can utilize to secure additional financial support. The options are (1) exert pressure on government to raise the funding levels; (2) find ways to supplement regular governmental funding, e.g. through the pursuit of grants, donations and private loans; (3) discover efficiencies that allow them to provide comparable services at a lower cost (e.g. contracting out; economies of scale; new technologies); or (4) reduce costs by sacrificing some of the range or quality of services they initially promised.

Public charter schools are banding together to try to influence funding decisions at the local and national level. Nonprofit support groups such as FOCUS, the Charter School Development Corporation and the Charter School Resource Center have worked closely with Congress, the Control Board, and, more recently, the City Council to ensure that there is adequate funding for public charter schools. It was at the urgings of these organizations that Congress established the revolving loan fund and provided the bid preference for acquiring vacant DCPS facilities. The recently vetoed DC FY2000 appropriations legislation pushed the facilities issue further by giving the District 90 days in which to craft a comprehensive plan to dispose of its facilities. The City Council has likewise shown great interest in resolving this issue.

Most public charter schools also seek additional financial assistance from non-governmental organizations and a few have also sought financial assistance from commercial banks. Non-governmental organizations provide both monetary and in-kind assistance for everything from office and classroom furniture and technology to instructional, legal, and financial assistance. Examples of grant funding ranges from $5,000 to as much as $500,000. The Charter School Resource Center has facilitated over $1.5 million to a number of schools for planning and start-up grants.[40] Much of this assistance is provided with no strings attached. Public charter schools also rely on volunteer assistance from parents and the community. Volunteers are used to staff the front office, mentor, tutor, organize fundraisers, and provide special training seminars. In one school professionals act as guest lecturers linking real life examples to academic instruction.

- **The hope for additional support through grants and donations appears to be universal, if not necessarily realistic in the longer-term.**

"What we are counting on is a large group of partnerships that in part will be made up of corporations and foundations. We expect gifts, grants, equipment, in-kind services, and the like from them. Now we are already getting equipment, I mean, computer equipment and things like that are getting. Not sufficient, but it is coming in."—A Charter School Board Member

"We have gotten less money than we have gotten stuff and in kind services. We routinely ask people for stuff... I come from a community agency background which means you beg and we get it."—A Charter School Founder

While the economy grows, including steep increases in foundation portfolios, there is at least some likelihood that this can pay off, at least for a selection of the more aggressive and attractive groups. Moreover, there is some prospect that education-oriented non-profits might be able to claim a larger proportion of overall local giving than they have in the past. However, other research has highlighted the fact that nonprofits in the District exist in an increasingly tumultuous and competitive funding environment.[41]

- **A relatively small number of charter schools have explicitly adopted a strategy of reducing per pupil costs through achieving economies of scale.**

Edison Schools is a leader in this respect. A for-profit corporation that has teamed with Friendship House to open three charter campuses in DC, Edison is guided by a long-term strategic plan that counts on unit costs-savings due to the centralization of such key functions as curriculum development, administration, research and evaluation, recruitment, and professional development. Tesseract Corporation, a partner in the new Southeast Academy Public Charter school, also depends upon an expansionary agenda for its vision to be economically feasible.

The business-plans of these for-profit and entrepreneurial non-profits suggest that large numbers of students are a necessity if charter schools are going to prove economically viable in the long run. If accurate, this assessment presents troubling implications for the smaller, niche-oriented and community-based nonprofit. These smaller, community-based charters are the ones that have focused most on educationally disadvantaged students, and that have received the most sympathetic coverage in the media. But they are also the most economically dependent upon finding sources of support to augment the standard per pupil allocations.

Section Three: Governance Issues

Our discussion of governance issues focuses on four key decision-points. The first two---approving charters and holding them accountable—primarily involve the two chartering bodies. The third—school-level policy-making—primarily involves the board of trustees operating at each charter school. The fourth decision-point concerns the relationship between charters, DCPS, and the broader electorate. Existing legislation is relatively clear about what is expected at the first three points, and we present some preliminary observations about how well those expectations are being borne out. The terms by which the broad citizenry is to play its role in holding DCPS and the charters jointly responsible for meeting public needs are less clearly and formally defined. As we suggest, these arrangements are problematic and subject to political battles that have yet to take place.

Charter Schools and their Chartering Entities

The Chartering Process

Charter schools are a relatively new policy innovation and there are no universally agreed upon set of standards or guidelines that jurisdictions can turn to when establishing or evaluating their own chartering procedures. Indeed, there is a fundamentally ambiguity about just *how demanding* chartering boards should be. Charter proponents generally concede that it is important to weed out charlatans, those ill-prepared to manage a business according to sound financial principles, and anyone who might attempt to use the school as a platform to provoke hatred or undermine broadly accepted values. But this recognition of the need for a fairly scrupulous up-front review is tempered by their confidence in the market to weed out bad schools and their fear that the existing educational establishment will try to suffocate charters out of bureaucratic self-interest. The latter considerations lead some charter proponents to worry that charter boards will be too demanding and inflexible, scuttling innovation by apply a narrow and rigid vision of what is an acceptable charter application.

As a result of these concerns, charter proponents have generally favored having multiple chartering agencies, with at least one of those outside of the control of the local school board. Local school boards are presumed to have a conflict of interest when it comes to reviewing charter applications. Because charter schools might represent a threat to the conventional public school system—either directly by siphoning off resources or indirectly by eroding the existing system's public support—proponents expect them to be overly harsh watchdogs, granting few applications and then moving quickly to revoke charters whenever a pretext emerges. On the other hand, some feel that publicly elected chartering boards may be more likely to encourage the establishment of charters reflecting special community issues and needs.

As already noted, Congress responded to such concerns by insisting that there be at least two chartering agencies, one entirely outside the authority of the local school board.[42] The Public Charter School Board, whose members are appointed by the mayor from a list provided by the U.S. Department of Education, is generally seen as a more neutral and objective body, because it is not subject to the same conflict of interest presumed to affect the elected Board of Education (BOE). Yet others might argue that the PCSB has a potential conflict of interest of its own. Since the PCSB exists only to oversee the charter schools, and since its members at least initially have been chosen in part because of their interest in seeing the charter movement succeed, it is conceivable that the PSCB might become heavily invested in insuring that the charter movement thrive and expand.

A new phase in the DC charter school debate has focused on the question of whether or not there is a need for two separate chartering entities. Opinions regarding the quality of the two boards vary considerably and for this reason many people are reaching very different conclusions. For example, while the Washington Post has pointed out that the two failed charter schools were both chartered by the Board of Education[43], many DC residents—including some charter school advocates--have defended the BOE. They argue that, while the elected BOE may not always be efficient, its members have a better understanding of the educational needs of District students and a stronger commitment to protecting the traditional public school system from erosion than does the outside appointed Public Charter School Board.

- **At least on paper, the procedures and criteria applied by the two agencies are quite similar.**

Applicants to both boards are asked to provide detailed proposals, and the information requested and standards articulated by the two chartering bodies are very much the same. While both chartering bodies approved the maximum allowable number of charters for the 1998-99 school year, both found some proposals unacceptable and both have become increasingly careful at the chartering stage. Both boards report a general process of learning and evolution, which has led them to put greater emphasis on some factors than others, and which is introducing some new criteria. For example, both indicate an increased sense of the importance of financial and management skills. Both indicate that they are paying increased attention to the nature of the relationship between the proposed school-level boards and the founders; both are anxious to ensure that individuals who agree to serve on boards have a good understanding of their responsibilities and that there is no single leader or organizational partner is too dominant. Now that a substantial complement of schools are in place, both boards seem to be paying increased attention to the importance of filling certain gaps. Both, for example, were concerned that the initial round of charters excluded Wards 7 and 8, and both seem to feel that ensuring better spatial distribution of the schools is a legitimate criterion.

- **The perception remains among many at the school-level that the two boards differ, however, in their basic orientation and professional competence.**

The perception is strong that the Board of Education has been less hospitable to potential applicants, less scrupulous in reviewing applications, less helpful to applicants throughout the early stage. As we will see a little later in the report, the Board of Education also is seen as being more intrusive at the monitoring stage.

> "With the Charter Board, it's been a blessing. They are very professional, extremely supportive. They answer phone calls. It's just like you know that there's this group of people that if you need any help, they're there for you. Even though the accountability is very high, we don't mind it. Because they demand accountability on everything, but at the same time, they give us the support that we need."—A Charter School Founder and Administrator

It is not always clear whether those complaining about the BOE are attributing the problem to willful hostility or simple bureaucratic unresponsiveness. As researchers, we can affirm that dealing with the BOE was more difficult and frustrating than dealing with the PCSB when it came to simple matters like getting phone calls returned, gathering basic information, and scheduling interviews. If this was due to hostility toward the charters, however, that was not apparent in the interviews themselves. Rather, the difference seems attributable to a combination of fairly typical bureaucratic unresponsiveness and an underlying difference in philosophical orientation about what the proper relationship between the chartering board and the charters ought to be. It is important to recognize the latter, because it points to more fundamental differences at the core of the charter issue. It may even be a result of differences in staffing resources. The PCSB employs a significantly greater staff than does the Board of Education, providing them with more resources to monitor school performance and respond to school needs.

One can imagine chartering bodies adopting either of two pure roles. One role—the *"nurturer"*—sees the chartering agency as a genial and helpful partner of charter applicants, actively helping them master the application procedure by providing encouragement, information, and technical support. At the other extreme, the chartering body might adopt the role of the *"watchman,"* a vigilant guardian of the public interest that stands above and apart from the applicants and schools so as best to maintain professional distance and neutrality. Partly because of their different institutional origins and partly because of the personal backgrounds and beliefs of their members, the two DC chartering bodies seem to be locating themselves differently along the continuum between these two polar types.

Our coding scheme classified successful charter applications according to their level of sophistication (for example, their use of tables and figures; citation of national studies; style of presentation) and comprehensiveness (the extent to which they addressed the range of issues that the chartering boards had indicated they would consider). Overall applications to the Board of Education were less likely to be sophisticated and complete. On a three point scale, with 3 representing high sophistication and comprehensiveness, applications approved by BOE averaged 2.0 on both dimensions, while those approved by PCSB averaged 2.6 (sophistication) and 2.4 (comprehensiveness). The lower BOE averages, however, were primarily due to a very small number of applications that were approved in spite of being substantially below the quality and completeness of the others.

- **In spite of perceived differences in operating procedures of the two chartering bodies, the schools that they have chartered look similar in many respects,**

Table 4 compares schools chartered by the Board of Education to those chartered by the Public Charter School Board. There are some small differences. The neighborhoods that Board of Education charters locate in are somewhat more middle-class in character; they have lower median incomes, but they have less poverty than neighborhoods housing schools chartered by PCSB. BOE charters locate in neighborhoods with a slightly higher proportion of Hispanic residents. But the schools themselves serve a lower percentage of Hispanic students. BOE chartered schools average a lower percentage of special education students. There is a tendency for PCSB schools to offer more classroom time, and a tendency for BOE schools to average smaller classrooms. But these differences for the most part are not large ones, and given the relatively small number of total schools they may be attributable to the effects of one or two extreme cases. The differences in schools size, niche orientation and teacher salary range may be more significant. BOE schools, at least during 1998-99, have tended to be quite a bit smaller and more likely to orient themselves toward a narrow student type. This profile is less likely to be threatening to DCPS. PCSB schools appear to be more likely to vary teacher pay according to individuals' skills and experience. The range from low to high teacher salaries in PCSB schools is almost twice as large as in those chartered by the elected Board of Education. Overall, the similarities in profile are much more apparent than the differences.

Table 4: DC Charter Schools Comparisons

	PCSB	BOE	Overall
Student Characteristics			
Average Enrollment	244	142	188
Percent Black	78.9%	79.9%	79.5%
Percent Hispanic	79.7%	13.5%	16.1%
Percent White	0.8%	1.0%	0.9%
Percent Special Ed.	21.8%	7.8%	14.3%
Percent Free & Reduced Lunch	66.7%	67.3%	67.0%
Percent LEP/NEP	78.9%	13.6%	14.1%
School Neighborhood Characteristics			
Median Household Income	$33,781	$29,721	$31,548
Percent in Poverty	16.2%	15.3%	15.7%
Percent Black (1990)	63.5%	70.9%	67.6%
Percent Hispanic (1990)	7.9%	11.4%	9.8%
School Program Characteristics			
Hours of Class per Week	37.5	33.3	35.3
School Days per Year	194.6	190	192.3
Students per Teacher	14.7	13.8	14.2
Teacher Salary Range	$13,525	$7,322	$10,241
Percent Niche Schools	44.4%	18.2%	30.0%

Monitoring and Accountability

The use of the term "public" by the public charter schools implies something more than the right to public funds. It also implies some form of accountability to the government, and the electorate behind that government, that is supplying these funds. Yet the very concept of charter schools is that a public service, education, can be provided without the need for government oversight and regulation. The mechanism of the market supplies all of the oversight necessary. Yet perhaps because there is an obligation to spend public money wisely, and because charter schools are taking responsibility for children, the District government has refused to entirely forfeit its right to oversee charters, while at the same time has provided them with a great deal of discretion to manage their own affairs as they see fit. So while charters may have some accounting to the parents of students directly, their "market incentive", they must also be aware that they are being watched and evaluated by a public entity capable of revoking their charter, and of even ending the entire program, should it be perceived as a threat to the public good.

In DC, federal law stipulates that each chartering authority shall monitor the schools it has authorized in order to ensure that they comply with applicable laws and provisions and to decide whether they have met the academic achievement expectations specified in their charter. The law specified that charters are to remain in effect for 15 years, but allows for their revocation prior to the end of that term if the school has committed "a violation of the conditions, terms, standards, or procedures set forth in the charter...or failed to meet the goals and student academic achievement expectations set forth in the charter."[44]

Both proponents and skeptics accept the premise that charter schools must be held accountable to public authorities. Proponents emphasize, however, that charters should be held accountable primarily for educational *outcomes*, for example, do they deliver the goods as far as raising children's academic achievement? They argue that if charters are to serve as laboratories of experimentation, and be truly responsive to diverse consumer needs, oversight and regulation of the *process* of what goes on in the schools should be limited to those elements that have to do with children's basic health and safety, as well as issues of financial management.[45] Skeptics raise two challenges to this. First, some argue that there are a broader range of process issues in which the public has a legitimate interest such as the legitimate hiring and firing of teachers and protection of student rights. Second, they argue that assuring an adequate level of quality monitoring and accountability is much more problematic than proponents assume, and that insufficiently accountable charter schools may do serious harm, both to individual students and to broader public institutions.

Whether chartering bodies around the country will prove up to the task of exercising effective oversight is one of the questions that remain unanswered. The nation's oldest charter schools have been in place only about seven years and three out of four of the nation's nearly 1,700 charter schools have opened in 1997 or later. We do know that by the beginning of the 1999 school year, 59 charter schools—just under four percent of those that had opened—subsequently closed, but not all of these were due to interventions by the chartering authorities.[46] In DC, two charters have been officially closed (Marcus Garvey and Young Technocrats), and one has been forbidden to open (Kwame Nkrumeh). In addition, at least two other schools were subject to special scrutiny that might have led to sanctions.

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Proponents of charters point to such interventions as evidence that the charter oversight function is working. But, since so little is known about how many charters might deserve closure—due to poor performance or bad management--the national picture remains very cloudy.[47] One recent analysis of charter school closings in Arizona, points a finger at state monitoring bodies for failing to give sufficiently strong and precise requirements to charters about the kinds of information they must include in their annual reports, and for failing to ensure that the information provided by the schools was reliable.[48]

Our research in the District included interviews with several members of the chartering bodies. In addition, all of those we interviewed at the individual charter schools were asked questions about the school's experiences with the chartering body. Here, again, we need to emphasize that things are changing rapidly. What is true today may prove obsolete tomorrow. Start-up problems may ease as chartering agencies and the schools gain experience. New problems may arise as the number of schools increases, if the formal role or basic structure of the local Board of Education changes, or if key individuals leave.

- **Both boards have begun to make the transition from focusing on the chartering process to spending increasing time and energy on monitoring those already in place.**

> *"Certainly over the last several months a huge amount of time has spent on oversight issues. Just a few random examples, we are still developing the accountability plans with each of the schools that are up and running."—Member of a Chartering Board*

DC's brand of charter schools entails an active role for public oversight. In some other jurisdictions, hard-core charter proponents tend to favor a "least possible" stance on regulation and oversight. They argue that parents are in the best position to judge whether their school is working, and they have the power to leave or to assert themselves through the school's governing body if the school does not deliver on its promises. They would like to see the charter boards generally keep their distance, until it is time to consider the charter for renewal or unless there is reason to suspect malfeasance of a substantial kind. Such a *laissez faire* perspective is strikingly absent in DC. Because they are the ones whose shoulders are peered over, one might expect charter school founders and staff to be the least hospitable to the idea that the charter boards should exercise strong oversight, but that is not what we found in DC.

With few exceptions, those we interviewed accepted the need for regulation and oversight, even of the rigorous kind. One charter school teacher even complained that examiners from their chartering entity had not spent nearly enough time in the school. Other charter school staff members have also appeared confident enough in their achievements that they often looked forward to the opportunity to prove themselves to their chartering entities.

That is not to say that we heard no complaints, however. Several of the schools express the view that they have been subject to far more intrusive oversight than necessary. Both board send teams to visit the schools, and the schools are asked to provide substantial details about a wide-range of issues from academic program to contracts and spending. Some charter school activists are convinced that they are policed more closely than traditional DCPS schools, a fact that they find ironic in light of the original vision of charter schools as being judged by outcomes rather than processes.

Generally speaking, schools overseen by the Public Charter School Board express less displeasure about the monitoring process. They consider PCSB to be rigorous to a fault, but they also consider that board to be even-handed and supportive. Some of the schools overseen by the elected Board of Education feel differently. They complain that the teams sent to their schools seem hostile or uninformed, and that BOE is slow to provide them with feedback from the monitoring process.

- **There appear to be some differences in the way the two boards balance the responsibility between exercising oversight and providing support.**

There is a balance to be struck between operating as a strict screen and serving a helping role. The PCSB seems to have positioned itself more to the latter than the BOE. That introduces some tensions for PCSB, but it has the positive effect that the schools it does charter seem to see the body more as an ally than an overseer. Critics of BOE's stance sometimes charge the board with outright hostility toward charters, but at least as often the write-off the problems to simple indifference, standard bureaucratic unresponsiveness, or lack of sufficient staff.

While generally far better received by the charters and the major Washington media, it is important to bear in mind that, from the standpoint of public accountability, the PCSB's approach poses some risks as well. Elected officials, and frequently the public, have a tendency to become suspicious when a regulating agency such as a chartering board becomes to "cozy" with those it is supposed to regulate. Even casual observers of American politics are familiar with terms such as "regulatory capture" and "iron triangles" where the regulated have become so close to the regulators that there emerges a substantial lack of public trust that the regulators are still watching out for the public good first and foremost instead of the good of the regulated.[49]

That both board's approaches have some risks and disadvantages makes us wary of proposals to move to a single chartering board. The relatively small price in the form of inconsistencies across the two boards is probably outbalanced by the benefits that come from competition that "keeps the other guy honest."

- **To date, both charter boards have found themselves paying more attention to internal matters of school management and finance than to systematic assessments of academic achievement.**

Those charter schools that have been shut down by their chartering entity, or are now on probation, appear to have come to this condition due to concerns over the leadership of the school, poor financial management practices, questionable hiring policies, lack of accounting and internal controls, and internal conflicts between management and/or the boards of directors – not due to concerns over curriculum and academic achievement. However, the collapse of two charter schools, the first of which received a great deal of attention in the local press, might have created a situation of two bad apples spoiling the bushel and potentially turning public opinion against charter schools generally.

This emphasis is not inappropriate at this stage. The primary vehicle for assessing student achievement is the Stanford 9 test that charters are required to administer along with the DCPS schools.[50] For the reasons outlined below, relying solely on standardized achievement test results, particularly during the first few years of operation, to measure student achievement be counter productive to the concept of charter schools. Recently released results for the spring suggest that students enrolled in public charter schools, on average, scored very poorly on the Stanford 9. Over 75 percent of students in seven of the 16 schools scored below basic in math and reading. Compared to DCPS schools, where test results are mixed, it would appear that public charter schools are not achieving higher standards. However, there are several good reasons why the charter boards may wish to avoid a headlong rush to use the Stanford test scores as an aggressive measure of success of failure. First, critics of standardized achievement tests point out that these tests may not be the best measures of a child's achievement level, particularly for non-standard curriculum. They suggest that these tests may be biased against minority students and students for whom English is not their first language. Second, DCPS has historically had a difficult time administering and monitoring test results due to the lack of an adequate information system and poor management. For this reason, there has been very little research on DCPS students test results and it would be premature to compare public charter school results with DCPS results until these issues are resolved. Third, because public charter school enterprises are so new, it will take several years for the schools that remain open to find their rhythm and appropriate level of staff and resource needs. Jumping to conclusions too early may deter the very type of innovation school choice proponents seek. There needs to be adequate time for these schools to mature before Stanford 9 tests results are aggressively used, and even then their use should be balanced with some complimentary assessment measures.

- **Absent a clearly enunciated program for assessing student achievement, however, there is a risk that an unsophisticated use of Stanford 9 scores will become the evaluative mechanism by default.**

Teachers at many of the schools commented on the Stanford 9 as being an inadequate measure of student achievement. Most of the schools have instituted various alternative forms of measurement, such as pre-tests upon entry, including the use of the GED. Others have structured a set of evenly spaced assignments or exams that they can use to track student performance over time. Nearly all of the teachers explained that they were close enough to the students personally that they intuitively know how well each student is performing and at what level they should be expected to perform. Nonetheless, as with the overall monitoring process, we found most teachers and charter school personnel understood the need to submit to a standard assessment process, like the Stanford 9. While they worry that the results might be misapplied or misunderstood, they do not deeply resent the fact that they are required to administer it, and some are quite supportive and confident that they can do well.

> "Useful, but I don't think it [The Stanford 9] is a particularly good diagnostic. It provides a baseline that is valued, as far as that goes, you know, talking about school accountability, but in the classroom to create strategies for students, no."—A Charter School Teacher

School-level Governance

A powerful theme in much of today's writing about education involves the importance of building a sense of involvement and community among principals, teachers, and parents at the school level. Teachers who believe that they are part of a "team" like their jobs better, and schools where this is the case seem to do a better job of raising student achievement even when the students are poor or come from unsupportive homes and neighborhoods. Children whose parents are informed and involved in their schooling generally do better as well.[51] Belief that incorporating teachers and parents is a key to educational revitalization has spurred an array of reform efforts at the local level. But in DC, as elsewhere, the complaint has often been proffered that the movement toward school-level decision-making is too timid. Some argue that it is simply unrealistic to expect public school bureaucracies to delegate significant authority to local school communities.

Many proponents of school-based decision-making see charters as the answer. Much of the literature on charter schools emphasizes the importance of teacher and parent participation as a critical component in supporting the schools in their missions. Charters can potentially facilitate this participation in several ways. First, because they are free from normal bureaucratic regulations, charters presumably can give teachers a real say in organizing the educational life of the school. Without union contracts and Board of Education mandates to constrain them, charter teachers can grapple directly with issues involving curriculum, pedagogical styles, and how the class, day, and school year should best be organized. Second, the simple fact that parents have chosen the school is seen as likely to establish a closer bond and sense of commitment. Third, because they are under more pressure to satisfy their "customers," charter schools are expected to engage in greater outreach efforts and to provide a more welcoming and responsive environment in which school-parent cooperation can take root and thrive. Fourth, most charter schools are expected to be smaller than most traditional public schools, and many analysts believe that small schools are in general more conducive to interaction, community-building, and parent participation.

- **Congress clearly implied in its legislation that it expected parents, teachers, and other members of the local community to play an on-going role in decision-making for the individual charter schools.**

The federal legislation, for example, stipulates that petitions to establish a charter must include a description of how such stakeholders "have been involved in the design and will continue to be involved in the implementation of the proposed school".[52] Each school is required to establish a board of trustees, and the federal law stipulates that both parents and teachers are eligible to serve. At least two of the members of the board must be parents of children attending the school, and a majority of the board must be DC residents.[53]

While we have not undertaken a comprehensive analysis of parent participation, we have gathered preliminary evidence based on interviews with parents and school staff.

- **As charter proponents predict, there does appear to be a substantial emphasis on reaching out to parents, or at least keeping them informed, on the part of many of the existing charter schools.**

Our interviews uncovered several ways the school provide information to parents. These outreach efforts include sending regular mailings, newsletters, teacher calls to parents when children are absent or do not perform, welcoming parents to visit the school and classrooms in order to observe, or play a role as teachers' aide, and –in the case of the Edison schools—providing each family with a computer and access to an electronic communication network.

- **Our interviews with active parents suggested to us that some of these activities have succeeded in making the school seem a welcoming and supportive place. Nonetheless, this has not led to a revolutionary change in school-parent relationships—or anything close to one.**

We asked the parents with whom we spoke to tell us whether charter schools were better, worse, or about the same as DCPS when it came to such matters as communication with parents, friendliness and helpfulness of teachers and staff, and providing parents with an opportunity to influence school programs and policies. While our sample of parents was neither large nor representative, the results are consistent enough to warrant presentation.[54] As indicated, parents were much more likely to say that the charter schools were better, particularly in communication and friendliness; moreover, some parents took pains to emphasize that this was true by a wide margin.

By and large, though, the charter schools are finding that they—like the traditional public schools—face an exceedingly difficult challenge when they attempt to entice parents to the next step on involvement—from passive supporters to regular activists. Most parents in most of the charter schools are engaged sporadically if at all. In some cases, the obstacles to parent involvement in charter schools may be even greater than in traditional public schools because charter schools may be in more distant neighborhoods.

- **In at least a few cases, moreover, there were signs that charter schools occasionally find that parent involvement can have unwelcome effects.**

We already have noted that some parents select charter schools with very little understanding of the specific mission or norms that the school hopes to emphasize. These parents see the charters as appealing primarily because they are different from the conventional school(s) that failed to deliver for their children. In some instances, however, charter founders have been surprised to find that these new parents actually have quite traditional views of what a school should be and do. They do not necessarily want charters to do fundamentally different things from DCPS, they want them to do what DCPS does but do it *better.* These parents sometimes grumble about strict attendance policies, heavy homework loads, longer school years, nontraditional teaching styles. And when these parents occasionally become active, it can represent a threat to the vision that motivated the founder and that attracted the teaching staff.

- **Similarly, we found indications that teachers are generally happy and feel part of a team, but little indication that they are deeply involved in the issues of policy or the overall management of the charter enterprise.**

For the most part, our interviews found teachers to be satisfied with the amount of control they had over the design and implementation of their curriculum. Like the parents and students, they enjoyed the greater personal contact they had with students, and the greater amount of time they would spend with individual students. Few teachers, however, were found to be deeply involved in the decision making process of the school, or desired to be. Few teachers were aware of the composition of the school's board of directors, or knew of what transpired at board meetings. However, nearly all felt confident that if anything important happened at these meetings, they would be able to find out about it. Teachers, it appeared, generally interacted closely with the principals and/or administrators of the school and almost unanimously felt comfortable bringing grievances and concerns to this central figure. Roughly half of the teachers had previous experience in the DC public school system while many others came from outside of the District, from private schools, or this was there first teaching experience. Very few teachers were DC certified (which the law does not require), though many were certified in other jurisdictions. Many also had special skills in foreign languages, GED teaching or ESL teaching.

Broad Governance Issues: Charters, the Public, and DCPS

Lingering not too far below the surface of the various other charter school issues that we have discussed are some unresolved questions about the proper place of charter schools in a democratically based system of public education. Ambiguities and uneasiness about these questions peek through most clearly when people reflect on the relationship between the charters and DCPS. From the standpoint of many proponents, charter schools are a promising innovation within the public system of education; they believe charters have an equal claim to public support (financial and otherwise), and they see resistance by traditional public systems to be self-interested and reactionary. Such resistance is common, however. Nationally, about one in five charter school reports problems associated with district resistance or regulations.[55]

- **The relationship between charters and conventional public schools is one of mutual wariness and a sizeable dose of tension.**

From the standpoint of charter advocates, teachers, and parents, hostility and non-cooperation mark the relationship between charters and DCPS. Unlike some jurisdictions around the country, charter proponents in DC tend to see their movement as consistent with traditions of public education. They fear that the broader District population does not understand this, however, and that the leadership within DCPS aggressively rejects this view. We were told numerous stories about perceived DCPS hostility and non-cooperation. Most of these stories involved charter schools' access to closed or under-utilized or vacant DCPS facilities. As already related, charter schools indicate that they have been denied accurate information about facilities, and that leasing and purchasing efforts have been thwarted or delayed by a combination of slow response, lack of cooperation, and deliberate efforts to inflate lease or sales prices. In addition, charters complain that DCPS has been slow to forward the records of students who transferred to charter schools. Some of the anecdotes referred to small slights that charters felt nonetheless were symbolically important because they indicated the fundamental refusal of DCPS to treat them as allies in public education. One charter school administrator noted, for example, that, in the wake of the Columbine tragedy in Colorado, DCPS still did not call their school to inform them of bomb scares. When they called to complain about this, a high level DCPS administrator said to them: "We don't call all of the Catholic schools...", indicating that she equated the charters schools with private, parochial schools.

By and large, charter supporters tend to see the wariness of the broader public as due to misinformation. Asked about their fears and hopes regarding the future, many combined a fear that hostile forces would cripple the movement with an optimism that the constituency for charters would steadily grow as more and more parents were exposed to them.

- **Some of this tension is a predictable and perhaps unavoidable offshoot of the deliberately ambiguous nature of the charter concept. It is simply not yet clear whether charter schools will lead to the revitalization the traditional public education system or its evisceration.**

From the standpoint of DCPS, there is concern that those fundamentally hostile to public bureaucracies will use charters to embarrass them and to dissipate resources. Our research was not designed to explore DCPS responses to the charters, so our impressions here are indirect. Nonetheless, it is important to note that some of these types of concern have a stronger foundation than is commonly understood.

Those sympathetic to charters are quick to dismiss the resistance of the traditional education system as reflective of a knee-jerk protective reaction by a public monopoly that is frightened that competition will expose its many flaws. But fears that the charter movement might precipitate the unraveling of the traditional public education system are deeply held and not without foundation.

Under one credible scenario charter inroads could lead to a sharp "marketization" of public education, with vouchers and large-scale for-profit enterprises substantially displacing the public system that is currently in place. As charter schools grow in visibility and influence, broader support for the traditional public school apparatus might wane. With broadening acceptance of market principles, oversight bodies might find it tougher and tougher to exercise authoritative oversight as charter schools and their supporters effectively portray this as heavy-handed interference. Seeing the opportunity to operate more freely, the most successful among the traditional public schools might convert to charter status, staring a snowball process that leaves DCPS with only the most difficult students and most problematic schools.[56] The legitimate per pupil *needs* would be much greater in DCPS, but any effort to adjust the funding formulas to reflect that would be resisted by a charter school coalition that was growing in political clout. Rather than pay more in taxes to support the broader system, charter school communities would seek ways to augment their *own* school budgets, either through voluntary fund-raising or lobbying to change the charter law to permit the imposition of tuition above and beyond the standard per pupil allotment. This would signal genuine systemic privatization. More and more, key decisions about the education system would be determined by market-like negotiations among parents and individual schools. Collective, democratic institutions for defining and enforcing shared visions would not fade away, of course, but their relative impact would be more distant and indirect.

The simple fact that current leaders within the indigenous DC charter movement may not favor this result—envisioning instead a revitalized public education system in which charters and traditional public schools mutually thrive—is not sufficient to put this fear to rest. On the national level, some of the forces backing charters *do* see them as a wedge that will open the way for much more radical institutional changes.[57] Some of these charter supporters are disingenuous or misleading when they emphasize "public" aspect of charter schools. They adopt this language in large measure as a inoculation against some of the resistance that historically has stymied voucher proposals. But—at least at the national level—many of these proponents insist that it is the relatively unfettered exercise of supply and demand that is the only hope for genuine school reform. Thus, while strategically asserting that public regulation can protect citizens from abuses of the charter process, they more generally denigrate the public institutions for regulation and accountability and portray efforts at gathering information and conducting oversight as intrusive and unwarranted. The District, because of its lack of home rule and historic subjugation to the dictates of a Congress in which it lacks voting rights is especially vulnerable to the possibility that interests fundamentally hostile to public schools could capture the initiative.

- **There are at least some reasons, however, to be hopeful that the charter movement in the District of Columbia might avoid some of the debilitating aspects of ideologically-grounded polarization, and even become a national leader in mapping out a new vision of the relationship between charter schools and traditional public school systems.**

Most charter founders/leaders appear supportive of public education; take seriously the notion that they too are public schools; feel relationships could be complementary, not competitive. While these claims may in some instances be disingenuous—reflective of a political strategy to make charters seem less threatening—it is clear that many individuals involved in the DC charter movement come from traditions of public service, secularism, and liberalism, not the libertarian or fundamentalist strains that are powerful in some other jurisdictions. A sizable portion of the charter schools already operating have defined themselves as "niche" schools, seeking to serve a narrow constituency not easily accommodated by DCPS, rather than directly competing with DCPS for their core of students. The common per-pupil funding formula creates a potentially shared interest between DCPS and the charters; both can benefit if they can convince the City Council to allocate a larger portion of public spending on schools. This common interest is not likely to gel as long as either group believes that policy-makers might systematically favor one over the other. Since many charter proponents, though hardly all, see Congress as a friendlier environment, and DCPS expects that it will be better received by a local school board and Council, neither group is likely to push hard for collaboration while the status of home-rule is so unclear. This means that the prospects for a pro-education DCPS/charter coalition may be held in abeyance until the future governance structure for DC and DCPS begins to take shape.

Section Four: Implications and Recommendations

Typically, policy reports end with a series of conclusions about how the particular program under the microscope can be made to work better. But before offering recommendations about how to improve or better support charter schools within the District of Columbia there is a prior question that needs to be squarely addressed. For reasons somewhat unique to the District, the charter school experiment currently under way is seen by many local actors as an ideological and partisan imposition, an unwelcome reminder of the semi-colonial status of the District and an alien invader that should be erased, or, failing that, effectively reigned in. The big question lingering in the background, then, is whether local officials, citizens, educators, foundations, businesses and other interest groups will try to make charters a success at all.

Answering the Big Question: To Fight Charters or to Embrace Them

In broad terms, we see four alternatives. At one extreme is the option to assertively try to *kill or harass* the charter movement in order to limit its threat to the traditional public school system. At the other extreme is an *enthusiastic adoption* of the charter movement, a collective decision to declare the experiment a success and to embrace the charter model and expand it as fully as possible. Politics tend not to produce extreme results, so the third and fourth alternatives fall between these extremes. Less extreme a position of resistance than an attempt to kill or harass would be the adoption of a stance of *benign neglect*. This alternative would see local actors staying deliberately at arms' length from the charter movement, letting it rise or fall on its own but providing neither support nor encouragement. Less extreme a position of support than enthusiastic adoption would be a stance of *cautious embrace and targeted* *support.* For reasons we now present, we recommend the fourth alternative and we follow that broad recommendation with some specific suggestions of what such a strategy might comprise for key stakeholders in the local political and policy arenas.

Our reasoning against a stance of outright opposition to charters develops partly along pragmatic lines. Charters have made substantial inroads in the District and throughout the country. While their ultimate scale and consequences are not yet determined, it is apparent that charter schools are here to stay. Moreover, in the particular case of the District, local political circumstances make outright opposition especially likely to fail or backfire. The prospect that Congress might intervene again—and even more dramatically—is an unavoidable backdrop against which local options must be evaluated. Further, resistance to a congressionally sponsored program may jeopardize the slowly growing momentum on Capitol Hill for restoring local control over education. Conservative Republicans have made it clear that they would like to use the District as a national testing ground for vouchers and other market-based reforms. Even many Democrats on Capitol Hill have an extremely negative view of the capacity of the local educational system to reform itself. If local actors are seen as sabotaging charters, moderates in Congress, who have held tried to restrain their colleagues from full-scale assaults on local home rule, might find their position eroded. In addition to vouchers and the maintenance of Control Board oversight, Congress might act to fundamentally redesign local educational governance, for example, by eliminating the elected school board.

There is another—less defensive—set of reasons for local actors to adopt a more supportive stance toward charters. And these reasons also present an argument for moving beyond benign neglect to a more affirmative embrace of the charter initiative.

Although it is true that Congress imposed the current charter legislation upon the District, it is not true that charters are necessarily alien to local norms and sentiments.

- *In at least some important senses, the ideas, and even some of the institutional mechanisms of the charter school experiment, are very much in keeping with the local political culture and with previous home-grown efforts to make schools more innovative, effective, and responsive to DC citizens' needs.*

The general notions of public school choice and school-based innovation and decision-making have long traditions in the District. Superintendent Smith made these centerpieces of his reform agenda roughly ten years ago. Moreover, the basic currents run deeper still. During the 1960s, DC was regarded as a national leader in the movement to decentralize decision-making to local schools and local communities. The Adams Morgan School Project was an experiment in community control, with support from Antioch College and from the federal government, which lasted from 1967-1974.[58] During the 1970s, when white flight began to de-populate some of the predominantly white west-of-the-park schools, concerned parents feared that low enrollments would be used as an excuse by central authorities to close their neighborhood schools. They addressed this challenge, in part, by seeking ways to attract middle-class black children from other neighborhoods. One result was an innovative cluster of six schools, each of which offered some distinct educational elements and within which transfer was relatively easy.[59]

This local tradition of public school choice, alternative education, and school-based decision-making provides a new perspective on the charter school movement in DC. The Board of Education (with its school-within-a-school charter initiative) and the DC City Council (with its charter school bill that was passed but then overtaken by

Congressional action) had begun to shape an indigenous form of charter schools before Congress stepped in. Much of that earlier history has already been forgotten, but even among those who remember it there is a tendency to dismiss the local efforts as calculated gambles meant primarily to pre-empt the federal intervention. Setting those efforts in the broader historical context suggests that this skeptical view may be shortsighted. DC has been, and still desires to be, at the forefront of progressive innovation in education. Those local organizations supporting charters are merely another manifestation of this desire.

The compatibility between charters and local democratic impulses shows in another way as well. Among the individuals and groups that have responded to the charter option are many that have strong and clear credentials as liberal grassroots providers of social services and community leadership. Many of the charters themselves, such as Carlos Rosario and Next Step, are based in local not-for-profits that have provided social welfare services to their communities for many years. If these individuals and groups do not burn-out or get displaced by better-capitalized non-local organizations, it is reasonable to hope and expect that they might put a stamp upon the District's charter movement that is distinctly reflective to the local politics instead of national. But that result is not assured. The indigenous constituency for charters may need broader and more proactive support in order to hold their own. Cautious embrace of charters, coupled with targeted efforts to support those aspects that are most reflective of local ideals, is more likely to steer things in that direction than is undifferentiated resistance or calculated indifference.

Why not, then, go all the way and enthusiastically adopt charters as an alternative to the traditional system of providing public education? Charter schools, at this point, are a promising idea but not a proven success. Even some highly sympathetic observers now concede that it is unlikely charters will deliver the full range of benefits that have been promised by more starry-eyed proponents. As Bryan Hassel, a charter school proponent, concludes from his study of charter schools in Colorado, Massachusetts, and Michigan:

> To be sure, charter schools have done interesting and varied things with their curricula, their instructional practices, their staffing, their budgets, and their governance. But the innovations that charter schools have undertaken are, by and large, innovations that have been proposed elsewhere and, to a limited extent, carried out by existing public schools...In short, charter schools are unlikely to transform public education by serving as laboratories for 'good ideas' at the school level.[60]

Moreover, there is much more of value in the traditional system than the "blow it up and start over" crowd implies. Many policy initiatives hit the ground with fanfare and gushing reviews only to falter later when the original sponsors and key proponents lose interest, and there is certainly a possibility that this will prove to be the case with charter schools as well.

- *Since there* is *a chance the growth of the charter alternative will sap some of the resources and support from the broader public system, it is appropriate that local officials balance any new enthusiasms for charters against the need to ensure that DCPS is nurtured and improved simultaneously.*

Making Charters a Local Initiative: A Strategy of Cautious Embrace and Targeted Support

What would a strategy of cautious embrace and targeted support entail? In this final section we discuss broad policy strategies that are consistent with the goal of nurturing a charter movement that is consistent with local goals and the reinvigoration of democratically responsive public education in the District of Columbia. The broad strategies we consider involve: (1) picking winner and losers, (2) providing infrastructure support, (3) managing markets, (4) fine-tuning the oversight function, and (5) building a pro-education constituency. In some cases we make specific recommendations to specific actors. In others, we simply identify potential risks and benefits.

Picking Winners: Combining Community and Competence

In light of the open-ended and uncertain future of the broader charter movement—along with the fact that even charter proponents say that we should expect some charter schools to fail—one reasonable strategy would be to identify a small core of particularly promising charter schools and focus attention and resources on the task of ensuring that they thrive and grow. This strategy of "picking winners" has several potential advantages. First, by concentrating limited resources on a smaller number of schools, this strategy might have more impact than would an approach that spreads resources widely but thinly. Second, by targeting the schools most likely to succeed, it reduces the chances that money and energy will be wasted in trying to start and sustain marginal charter schools that are unlikely to add much to the existing array of schools even if they manage to survive. Third, by keeping the overall number of schools lower, this strategy may reduce some of the real and perceived threats to DCPS, making it easier to build a pro-education coalition that encompasses groups in both the charter and non-charter camps.

To the extent they adopt such a picking winners strategy, local authorities, foundations, corporate sponsors, and nonprofit partners should target their efforts on schools that genuinely combine roots in the local community and managerial and pedagogical competence. The rapid expansion of charter schools throughout the nation has fed, and been fed by, a growing role for large, private firms that seek to own or manage schools on a national or regional scale. The jury is still out on whether these corporate ventures will prove successful both educationally and economically. If these large-scale corporate ventures can deliver better education in ways that are consistent with local needs, their involvement should be welcomed. The commitment of these large-scale organizations is a contingent one, however. Their investment in the District will be withdrawn if they fail to satisfy their investors and parent companies. Local authorities should not put up road-blocks to their success, but neither do they have an obligation to subsidize their efforts. For local organizations seeking to allocate scarce resources, we think it is reasonable to focus first on those charter schools that can demonstrate clearly that they reflect, and are continuously guided by, the needs and expressed values of the local community.

Local sponsors, however, should be cautious about picking winners based solely on charismatic leadership or evidence of grassroots involvement in other arenas. Several of the charter schools we visited are heavily reliant on the energy and vision provided by one or two founders. Inspiring leaders can go a long way in motivating teachers and students, and can burst through many obstacles that emerge in the start-up years. But charismatic leadership is a fragile base for long-term survival. The risk of "founder burnout" loom large in some schools, as does the risk of burnout among teachers for whom the longer hours and greater responsibilities may eventually erode the reservoirs of enthusiasm that have sustained them thus far. In addition, it is important to remember that individual and organizational characteristics that lead to success in one venue do not necessarily generate the same result when applied to the day-to-day and year-to-year running of a school. Powerful and impressive leaders emerging from with local community organizations may have little skill or temperament for managing a large budget. Groups that have done wonders delivering social services or providing advocacy for the disadvantaged do not necessarily know what is entailed in managing an *educational* enterprise. While it is true that such groups have the option of contracting with other firms to provide some of the skills and expertise they lack, contracting out can be disastrous when the contractors do not know enough about the enterprise to manage effective oversight and control.

Public authorities and private organizations also should be cautious about picking winners based solely on standardized achievement results. It will take several years worth of data to suggest whether public charter schools are improving student performance, and because many schools are focusing on a specific student population that traditionally does not test well, standardized achievement tests may not be the best measures of student performance.

Infrastructure Support as an Alternative to Picking Winners

A picking-the-winners strategy has other limits, too. Firstly, it is not all that apparent that we know *how* to pick winners in the charter school game. Putting all local eggs into a few schools' baskets risks substantial losses in resources and confidence if one or two efforts deemed to be promising turn out to be duds. Secondly, a strategy of picking winners can easily take a safe and more conservative course; truly imaginative and innovative ideas might seem too "far out" and risky, with the ironic result that a policy initiative originally premised on the need for diversity and innovation might end up discouraging the same. Third, a strategy of picking winners might easily develop into a policy of supporting most those who need it the least. We have suggested that charter schools linked to pre-existing organizations and those with large outside partners may have the best chance of making it through the difficult start-up years. Some would argue, then, that the more progressive use of public energy and resources would be to help schools without such initial advantages, those that are unlikely to survive without such targeted support but that—once established—would make the educational landscape more diverse and equitable.

One reasonable alternative is to focus less on particular schools and more on the array of institutions that do or could support charter schools more generally. Such a strategy may be more in keeping with the idea that charters should prove themselves in the market rather than by their ability to attract powerful patrons. An infrastructure-development approach does not force policy-makers, foundations, corporate patrons, and others to pretend that they know with confidence what makes a truly successful school. Rather, by systematically shaping the local institutional environment to be more conducive to charter school success, key stakeholders gain the luxury to sit back and let the schools prove themselves.

We see at least three key infrastructure nodes where targeted support might generate substantial pay-offs, and not just for the charter schools but for DCPS as well. These are:

Infrastructure Option #1: Technological know-how, training, and professional development:

With the possible exception of those with the largest national charter partners—such as Edison Schools—potential and new charter schools have a tremendous need for information, expertise, and good advice. A number of organizations have tried to step into this role. Some-- like the Center for Education Reform, Hudson Institute, Pioneer

Institute for Public Policy Research, and the U.S. Department of Education--are national in scope. Others are local in origin and orientation, including, the Charter School Resource Center, FOCUS, and, to some extent, the chartering agencies. Some, like AppleTree came from the outside, but have focused attention primarily on DC. Sound, objective information and advice can improve charter applications and help charters avoid unnecessary mistakes.

For reasons discussed a little later, we think that it probably is better for this supportive role to be played by an independent organization than by the public chartering agencies themselves. And, because local circumstances and local values are important, we think it is important that DC charters have access to truly local institutions of support, not simply rely on national organizations and networks. None of the existing support institutions have firm commitments for future funding. Some have benefited from support from non-local entities, for example the Walton Family Foundation, which may or may not be forthcoming in the future. Foundations and local officials seeking to target support to build the general charter school infrastructure might do well to consider stepping in more aggressively to support local information and technological support organizations that make themselves available to all potential and operating charter schools.

Infrastructure Option #2: Parent information systems.

Increasing parent information is the "Mom and apple pie" issue in education reform. Almost no one opposes it, at least as an abstract ideal. Proponents of market-oriented proposals, like many charter advocates, favor it because economic theories assume that markets work best when consumers are informed. Proponents of traditional public education support it because theories about democracy assume that an informed citizenry will make better collective choices. One way to improve the infrastructure of support for both charters and traditional public schools, therefore, may be to support various mechanisms to collect and disseminate more and better information about schools and their performance to parents and the community at large. For example, the 21st Century School Fund has just launched a new website—DCSchoolSearch.com—that provides parents with information about the programs, students, facilities, and policies of public schools, including DCPS and the charters. This venture is a partnership of some local nonprofits and national funding sources, including the Smith Richardson Foundation and the National Science Foundation. But projects like this need to be enriched and sustained over time—and that may require an increase in support from local funding sources.

Infrastructure Option #3: Political representation and collective self-help.

Technical support and information dissemination are valuable to charter schools, but they may not be enough to help them survive. While charter schools are frequently discussed in terms of market models, the truth of the matter is that their viability depends as much on financing and regulatory actions by public authorities as it does on micro-level patters of supply and demand. For this reason, charter schools need to act as interest groups within democratic political arenas, and not just as firms offering education to potential consumers.

Of the existing support institutions, FOCUS and the Charter School Coalition that it helped to launch, are the most self-conscious in attempting to fill this role. They have actively lobbied at multiple levels and multiple branches of government—Congress, the Control Board, the office of the Mayor, the Ciity Council, the school board—to project and protect the interests of charter schools. There is an intellectual traditional in American thought that holds that schooling should somehow remain "outside" of politics. From that perspective, efforts such as those by FOCUS and the Charter School Coalition seem inappropriate, almost unseemly. But more recent studies of school reform emphasize the importance of engaging the broader community—building a collective dialogue around education issues and finding ways to mobilize a cross-sector constituency for investing in urban youth.[61] From that perspective, efforts by charters to engage in politics can be welcome as part of a healthy democratic discussion, and institutional nodes like FOCUS and the Charter School Coalition can be seen as part of the core infrastructure that is worth nurturing.

That said, not all political effort on the part of charter schools must be regarded favorably. Those hoping to see charters as a part of a broad, locally responsive approach to educational improvement might reasonably oppose collective efforts by charter proponents when those efforts have the goal or effect of undermining local institutions of democracy and governance. That FOCUS and the Charter School Coalition have been quick to turn to Congress and the Control Board for support is understandable in the current political context. Congress and the Control Board, for better or worse, are where the formal authority and control over resources currently reside. A case can even be made that the District benefits from having local groups with access to Congress, including the Republican leadership. In some instances, such access has increased the amount of funding made available to the community beyond that that would have been likely if those Republicans regarded the District as uniformly hostile toward Congressional "stewardship."

As Congress begins to return educational decision-making to local control, it is reasonable for proponents of local democracy to insist that their support of the political voice for charters be linked to expectations that the charter groups will exercise that voice as local citizens. Acting as local citizens includes some responsibility to respect local authority when it is grounded in the expressed will of the majority. That does not mean that charter schools should passively accept unfavorable actions by local government if those violate the law or norms of fairness. Indeed, in those instances the charter schools as local citizens should anticipate and receive political support from other local groups, even those not necessarily supportive of the charter idea. But it does suggest that charter proponents should restrain themselves from seeking to by-pass local arenas whenever they feel that they might get a more sympathetic hearing elsewhere.

Strategies of picking winners and strategies of infrastructure support are not mutually exclusive. Among the many local stake-holders in DC schools, some groups may wish to follow one strategy; some the other. Good government practices suggest that local public authorities should limit themselves to infrastructure support. That is partly because they are better situated than others to engage in such efforts. It is also because elected officials have strong incentive to turn a picking winners strategy into a vehicle for creating political patronage, rewarding supporters, and trading favorable decisions for votes and campaign support. Foundations and corporate benefactors more commonly have preferred a strategy of picking winners; they tend to be more comfortable allocating their resources to individuals and groups in whom they have confidence and with whose vision they are most in sympathy. Adopting particular charter schools is attractive, also, because it allows them to publicly identify themselves with successful and popular enterprises. As private actors they are not under the same constraints as public officials to deal out an even hand. While recognizing and appreciating these facts, we would suggest that there are good reasons for the local foundation corporate communities to incorporate an infrastructure-building component into any plans to support public schools. What the District needs now is a better *system* for public education, not simply a few more schools that work well.

Managing the Market

For some charter proponents, competition and market forces are the whole story; any attempt by public authorities to steer or regulate the process are to be resisted at all costs. But this view rests on an idealized vision of how markets really work. Rather than a smoothly self-adjusting machine, markets in practice often involve sharp and disruptive changes, high degrees of uncertainty, and structured inequalities. Firms go out of existence, drop unprofitable services, allow the quality of products to decline. Workers lose jobs, strike, find themselves stressed by demands to work longer or harder, grow alienated in jobs they once tackled enthusiastically. Consumers regret the loss of neighborhoods businesses displaced by impersonal chain stores, spend more time than they want looking for bargains, or accept higher costs and lower quality as the price of saving time for family, friends, and personal pursuits.

When it comes to certain discretionary goods and services, we may be quite willing to tolerate short-term disruptions and inconveniences when supply and demand get out of line. While we might gripe and groan a bit if the local pharmacy closes, we often know that there are other outlets readily available, if we are willing to travel a little further or pay a little higher price.[62] But continuity in schooling is seen as a more valuable commodity. Communities faced with a sudden school closing typically react sharply; parents worry that their children will be disoriented, be separated from teacher/mentors, suffer socially, and experience academic gaps due to shifting curriculum and teaching styles if forced to shift schools against their will. As a result, the threat that competition and deregulation will lead to educational disruptions is an important one to consider.

One way to make charter schools work better would be to use public authority and community institutions to soften the potentially disrupting consequences that are associated with strategies—like charter schools—that expand system exposure to the sometimes herky-jerky effects of educational supply and demand. Here we offer thoughts about how this might be done in four key areas.

Managing the Market Option #1: Policies for assessing and taking into account the risks of oversupply.

Federal legislation established a maximum number of charters that could be approved in a given year (10 per chartering board); it did not set a minimum. Initially, there was considerable pressure on the boards to approve as many as possible under those caps. That pressure came partly from the terms of the law itself, which seemed to place the burden of proof on the boards to defend any decisions to deny a reasonable proposal.[63] The pressure—particularly on the elected school board--also came from concern that Congress would intervene even more aggressively if it concluded that the boards were being too demanding, since that would be seen as an effort to undermine Congressional intent.

With nearly thirty schools now in place, and roughly ten percent of DC public school children now attending charter schools, these initial concerns no longer apply.

Even if no more schools were approved, the planned growth of the existing charters would be sufficient to accommodate hundreds of more children. But to the extent that these financial plans of these schools depend upon anticipated growth, there is a looming risk that the market will become over-saturated. Much of the discussion about competition to date has focused on the competition between the charters and DCPS. Neglected has been consideration of the potential for an increasingly competitive relation among the charters themselves.

Ironically, in spite of the emphasis on competition that underlies the charter idea, the long-lines of parents anxious to try something new has meant that DC charters have so far been buffered from the need to aggressively compete. Now that the first wave of pent-up demand has been accommodated, however, there is a chance that this situation will change. If we assume that some substantial portion of DC families are committed to the existing public schools—either due to lethargy, loyalty, convenience, or the belief that those schools really are doing a satisfactory job—it is realistic to expect that charters will soon find themselves competing for the same students. This may erode some of the collective spirit that to date has allowed the charters to work together cooperatively. It could increase the pressure on some schools to exaggerate their claimed benefits in the effort to increase their appeal. And—since some schools are likely to succeed more than others in a truly competitive environment—it could lead some schools to lose business—and subsequently to have to cut the quality of their services or face closing down.

For die-hard fans of market forces, this of course is just what one would want to see. But for those who are concerned about educational disruptions, the scenario it gives rise to is much less appealing. It is reasonable and appropriate for the chartering agencies to consider such risks in evaluating future charter proposals. This need not mean effectively imposing a new and lower cap. It might, at least initially, mean taking into greater account assessments of how the proposed school "product" fits into the constellation of products already being offered. The boards already appear to be paying more explicit attention to the geographical distribution of charters, and looking somewhat more favorably on applications that would involve bringing a school into underserved neighborhoods. They might reasonably consider, too, whether new charters define a niche that is relatively under-served; niche charters that propose to take on already-occupied niches might be scrutinized more carefully, and as might general curriculum schools that define no distinguishable niche. Since oversupply is not directly mentioned in the federal legislation as an acceptable reason for denying a charter, the rationale for such actions would have to rest on the chartering boards' assessment of whether the applicants' budget and enrollment forecasts are realistic in a more competitive environment.

Managing the Market Option #2: "Early warning" signals, to decrease the likelihood of mid-year and last-minute closings.

It is almost inevitable that a public system incorporating charters and school choice will entail some increase in closings and disruptions, even if the chartering boards pay increased attention to managing supply. Public policy and community efforts, however, might be able to reduce some of the negative consequences of such disruptions, however. One way to do so would be to take steps to decrease the likelihood that closings will occur during the academic year, or at the last minute when schools are about to open in the fall.

There are at least two kinds of approaches to providing better early warning signals. One approach relies on self-policing by parents, but takes steps to ensure that parents have at their disposal more and better and more timely information about the school's financial, management, and academic performance. Although Congressional law stipulates that produce an annual report and make such reports available for review, it does not specify what information must be in the report, when and where it should be posted; nor does it make any provision for collating such reports and making the entire package of information available so parents can make comparisons. Steps should be taken to produce and publicly disseminate a mid-summer comprehensive report on the current status of charter schools, including information on enrollment, projected open spaces, length of waiting list the previous year, teacher pupil ratio, test scores, and broadly itemized revenues and expenditures. This might require that the two chartering boards agree to require some common information, and set and enforce a timetable for collecting that information. But, with limited financial support from a local foundation, and of a number of credible non-profit organizations could take on the task of collating and disseminating the information. An August 1 deadline would allow the information to reach parents in time to make or reconsider their choices before the new school year begins.

A second type of early warning approach would entail a more proactive stance by the chartering agencies. Currently, the procedure for declaring a school to be on probation, the specific steps a school must take to get off probation, and the timetable for the board to make its determination all appear to be *ad hoc*. This exacerbates uncertainty for parents and the schools alike. By law or by informal agreement, the charter agencies should adopt a clearer and more consistent set of standards for identifying schools as being at various stages of risk of closure, and set clear deadlines by which questions must be resolved. These timetables should be binding on both schools and chartering agencies. Except in extreme cases, schools that have not been informed they cannot open by a date specified (perhaps August 1), should be allowed to open and parents should be assured that the charter board will allow the school to operate throughout the academic year.

Managing the Market Option #3: "Parachutes"

Even with early warning systems in place it is likely that some charter schools occasionally will run into trouble. "Parachutes"--institutions and processes for handling school failures with a minimum of disruption to students and families–should be devised for those instances in which mid-year charter revocations are unavoidable.

Some may relinquish their charter voluntary, due to financial problems, leadership turnover, or disappointing results. In other cases the charters may have to be revoked. While early warning systems may make it more likely that these shifts can be absorbed during the summers and with enough lead-time for parents and employees to make other arrangements, in other cases that may not be possible. But relinquishing or revoking a charter need not mean abruptly closing a school, and throwing teachers and children into turmoil. Either under the aegis of the chartering bodies or via a collaborative arrangements among the charter schools and DCPS, it may be possible to establish a stand-by line-up of "takeover teams," comprising four or five administrators and teachers, who would be on-call to step in and manage a school so that students have the opportunity to finish out the year. Teams could consist of retired teachers and administrators, or be "lent" to enterprise by other schools. A pool of funds would be needed to compensate the teams or reimburse the schools lending personnel.

Managing the Market Option #4: Buffering Mechanisms

At least during the start-up years, when enrollments are changing rapidly and somewhat unpredictably from year to year it may be appropriate to establish procedures that would protect DCPS from sudden declines in funding if enrollments sharply drop. Funding provisions now in effect mean that DCPS could experience sharp declines in funding if many students suddenly transfer to charter schools. At least one projection suggests that DCPS enrollment is likely to fall to 66,300 in fiscal year 2000, a decline of nearly 13,500 (17%) over just four years.[64] In theory, this threat is valuable as an inducement to DCPS to do a better job. But a sudden loss in support can also spark a downward spiral. The loss of 2% of existing students and the per pupil revenues associated with them, for example, would not mean that expenses would be 2% lower as well. Existing buildings must be maintained, teacher contracts respected, etc. Eventually, fewer students might translate into lower costs, but if budget cuts rapidly follow enrollment declines, DCPS will lose its ability to respond. The economist Albert O. Hirschman discusses this in terms of the danger that can come about when a system relies exclusively on competition and consumer exit to allocate resources. While a small drop in revenues may stir a firm to improve the quality of its product or lower its price, "if revenue decline exceeds a certain large percentage of sales volume, no recuperation ensues—beyond a certain point, losses will weaken the firm so badly that bankruptcy will occur before any remedial actions can take effect."[65]

Massachusetts faced a similar situation when it instituted a statewide system of public school choice. Under the law enacted in 1991, families could enroll their children in any school district in the state, no matter where they lived; the district losing the student was to pay to the receiving district the full amount of the receiving district's normal per pupil expenditure. While the law itself proved popular, it quickly became apparent that a double-whammy was hitting some low-income, urban school districts. They were losing some of their best students to surrounding districts, being left with a population that was even more needy in some respects, and yet being forced to bear the costs of educating the students who exited to the more advantaged school districts. Since then, Massachusetts has changed the law several times, always in ways that reduced the financial cost to low-income districts when their students exercise the option to leave.[66] While this may have had the effect of reducing the financial incentive for those districts to reform themselves, it is nonetheless seen in that state as having resulted in a less punitive system and one that leaves low-performing public school systems with enough resources to enable them to undertake reforms if they wish to do so.

Currently, uncertainty about year-to-year enrollment trends is dealt with by having the Chief Financial officer set aside 5% of the local public school budget until the fall pupil count is completed. That amount is then allocated between DCPS and the charter schools based upon that year's actual student enrollment. One way to buffer the impact of declining enrollments would be to modify the process to ensure that the effects of declining enrollment are phased in more gradually. If DCPS and the charter schools (as a group) were ensured *the greater* of the per student formula based on (a) the average of the three previous years' enrollments, or (b) or the new fall enrollment, the impact of declining revenues would be delayed by a full year, giving schools more time to plan and adjust. This might contribute to a lessening of some of the uncertainty and direct competition between DCPS and charters that has eroded prospects for cooperation.

Fine-tuning the Oversight Function

Some have proposed dramatic realignments in the chartering and oversight arrangements. Based on the perception that it has been the more professional and effective, some prominent voices have suggested that the Public Charter School Board become the sole chartering body. Based on the belief that it better reflects local values and home rule, others argue that the Board of Education should gain complete control when, as anticipated, the Control Board returns its full powers in the year 2000. We have suggested that competition between the two boards may be a healthy kind of pluralism. And we think that both boards are engaged in a learning process that should not be disrupted, at this time, by any radical changes. Nonetheless, we think that some fine-tuning should take place within both bodies.

Fine-tuning Oversight Option #1: Separating Oversight from Support

As we have noted, the two chartering agencies differ somewhat in the way they define their role. The Public Charter School Board has consciously made encouragement and support for charter schools a priority. PCSB's rallying cry is "We Charter Success." The DC Board of Education has adopted more of an arms' length relationship. We have already mentioned that some of that may be attributable to lack of staffing and political ambivalence (or resistance) to the charter idea. But some of it also reflects a legitimate stance for a regulatory body. When regulators and the regulated become too closely intertwined, the result can be harmful to the body politic.

PCSB's more genial and supportive stance has earned it substantial respect among the charter schools and their supporters. Moreover, it appears that PCSB so far has been able to avoid falling victim to agency "capture;" while helpful and supportive, the board has also maintained a stance of careful scrutiny and close oversight. A case can be made that PCSB's approach was just the right one for the start-up period, when uncertainty was high and when charters needed guidance and a helpful hand. As the process matures, however, it is appropriate for PCSB to disentangle itself a bit from the close relationship it has developed with the schools it oversees. That most certainly need not entail adopting a haughty, distant, or indifferent stance toward the schools. But it does mean putting itself in position where it can readily take remedial action—including revoking a charter—without feeling that it has somehow turned on a "partner" or bruised the charter movement overall. Just as importantly, it means eliminating any *appearance* to the broader community that might hesitate to intervene forcefully and "air the dirty linen" of the charter movement when it is discovered.

This somewhat more arms' length relationship is made possible by the existence of the other elements of the support infrastructure, especially if those elements become more institutionalized and more incorporated into the local community, as we have recommended. The PCSB can and should steer charter applicants and schools toward sources of managerial, financial, legal, and professional support, but should begin disassociating itself from the role of providing those supports itself.

Fine-tuning Oversight Option #2: Fair and Consistent Oversight

While some have proposed eliminating the Board of Education's role entirely, we believe that the advantages of having multiple chartering agencies and retaining a direct link to a democratically elected board far outweigh any prospective gains in efficiency or uniformity that would be gained by such action. Yet there are reforms that can and should be made.

Just as PCSB has to pay attention to the risk of appearing to be too close to the schools it oversees, the elected Board of Education has to be much more conscious of the need to maintain the appearance and reality of fairness and consistency. We have suggested that some of the Board's reputation for outright hostility toward charters is unwarranted. Insufficient staff and ingrained bad habits also play important roles. So do resentment toward charters because of their association with the Congressional dis-empowerment of the Board, and lack of a clear vision of how charters can be part of the public education enterprise.

As the Board of Education works toward its goal of re-assuming the authority for local educational policy-making, it is critically important that it shed its reputation for inconsistency, parochialism, and inefficiency. Charters are not the only—or even the most important—area in which the Board can and should adopt a more professional orientation. But, charter schools are strategically and symbolically important as one of the only areas in which the elected Board currently maintains some genuine authority. The Board needs to make its rules and procedures more transparent. If it needs more staff support to carry out its responsibilities, it should make that case affirmatively.

Building a Pro-Education Constituency: Strengthening DCPS and Charters Simultaneously

The story of charters in the District of Columbia has, so far, been a story about charters *versus* DCPS. Framed in that way, charters represent a challenge to important local values, and it is not surprising that they have been responded to warily in many quarters. Congress imposed charters upon a community that still treasures its claim upon the right of self-governance. Within Congress, much of the ideological steam behind charters came from a market-oriented conservatism that runs counter to local appreciation for the historical role of government in promoting the social welfare, limiting inequalities, and protecting civil rights.

Those who look warily on charters, therefore, have good reason to do so. Moreover, claims that charter schools are *the answer* to what ails inner-city education are at best premature and most likely just plain wrong.

Ultimately, bringing about system-wide improvement in DC schooling will call for a broad and sustained commitment to invest in children, particularly those in poor families. That in turn requires a broad and sustained constituency that will put into office public officials who understand the importance of education and hold those officials accountable if they flag in their commitment to do so.

The presence of a large charter school alternative has the potential to divert or divide that constituency. But it need not do so. It is theoretically possible to frame a school reform agenda that builds links between charter schools and traditional public schools so supporters of both can join forces. If that can draw more families into public schools and restore some of the broader community's confidence in public education, the result could be a stronger claim on the public's will to direct its taxes toward education and greater capacity to put those resources to good use.

Nurturing charters that combine competence with community roots, targeting resources to strengthen the infrastructure that supports public school choice in both charters and traditional public schools, managing the market to ensure that forces of supply and demand do not lead to instability and interruption, and evolving an oversight structure that is fair, equitable, and independent enough to intervene when needed are objectives that a broad cross-current of the community can endorse. As the District's citizens and local officials prepare to reclaim home rule in the area of education policy, they are in position to put a distinctive stamp on the charter movement—to show the nation that charters can deliver on the rhetorical promise to revitalize public education and to do so in a manner that is true to local values and collective ideals.

Endnotes

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[1] Another four states have laws but will not have any charter schools this year (Arkansas, New Hampshire, Virginia and Wyoming).

[2] Center for Education Reform, http://edreform.com/charters.htm (September 27, 1999).

[3] National charter school support groups include Charter Friends National Network, The National Charter School Accountability Network, Center for Education Reform, and Education Excellence Network, to name a few.

[4] Chris Pipho, "Stateline," Phi Delta Kappan, vol. 76 (June 1995): 742.

[5] Among the valuable studies of charter schools around the country are the following. Bryan C. Hassel, The Charter School Challenge (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1999); Jerry Horn and Garry Miron, Evaluation of the Michigan Public School Academy Initiative, 1999 Robert Maranto, Scott Milliman, Frederick Hess, and April Gresham, School Choice in the Real World: Lessons from Arizona Charter Schools (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999); Michael Mintrom, "Michigan's Charter School Movement," Michigan State University Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, Working Paper 98-14 (1998); Eric Rofes, "How are School Districts Responding to Charter Laws and Charter Schools?" (University of California at Berkeley: Policy Analysis for California Education, 1998); Amy Stuart Wells, et al., "Beyond the Rhetoric of Charter School Reform: A Study of 10 California School Districts" (University of California at Los Angeles, 1998).

[6] RPP International, The State of Charter Schools, Third Year Report, (US DOE, 1999); Center for Education Reform webpage; Call to Oklahoma State Department Of Education Charter School Administrator.

[7] RPP International, The State of Charter Schools, Third Year Report, (US DOE, 1999).

[8] Much of the scholarly work on public policy and agenda setting emphasizes the hit and miss nature of national politics. Frequently policies are selected because they simply happen to be available when a particular problem appears. More strategically minded policy entrepreneurs often will identify a public problem and present his or her policy solution in a way that makes it appear as the ideal solution. In the DC case, charter schools were a solution in search of a problem to solve. See John W. Kingdon, Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policy. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).

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[9] This was original legislation sponsored in the Senate by Senator James Jeffords (R-VT) and an amendment in the House to the DC Appropriations Act by Rep. Steve Gunderson (R-WI).

[10] The original law filibustered in the Senate was first introduced in 1995, but did not finally die until 1996. By the time the omnibus appropriations legislation for fiscal year 1996 (as Title II of P.L. 104-134) was passed, that fiscal year was already half over. Programmatic provisions in that bill could not take effect until the President signed the bill. Therefore, while the original federal charter school law is referred to as the DC School Reform Act of 1995, it was not until over half way through 1996 that it actually became a law. The first full year where charter schools were legal in the District was 1997 and it is in this year that the first schools were chartered and established.

[11] Center for Education Reform webpage.

[12] Marcus Garvey Public Charter school drew intense scrutiny, both locally and nationally, after its principal was accused, and subsequently convicted, of assaulting a Washington Times reporter when she visited the school. The charter school's board of directors replaced the principal, but continuing conflicts within the school and its directors, combined with concerns about finances and accountability, finally led the Board of Education to revoke the school's charter in May 1998.

[13] Marcus Garvey, Children's Studio, Next Step, Options, Edison-Friendship, and SEED.

[14] While it is counted as a single charter school, Edison-Friendship Public Charter School maintains two separate campuses. Unless specifically noted otherwise, Edison-Friendship is treated as a single unit.

[15] Copies of the interview protocols are available upon request.

[16] Sources include the Public Charter School Board, Board of Education, Friends of Choice for Urban Schools, the DC Charter School Resource Center, Parents United, the 21st First Century School Fund.

[17] For a more extended discussion of the market assumptions about school choice policies, and a review of the evidence from around the country, see Jeffrey R. Henig, "School Choice Outcomes: A Review of What We Know," in School Choice: Politics, Policy and Law, edited by Frank Kemerer and Stephen Sugarman (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, forthcoming).

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[18] Charter school advocates, however, are attempting to amend the federal law so that the siblings of current charter school students receive a special preference when applying to the same school. As of this writing, this provision has not yet been enacted into law.

[19] Hassel, The Charter School Challenge; Recalculated from Table 4-3, p. 88.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Hassel, The Charter School Challenge pp.: 7-8; 130-34.

[22] The one DCPS entry of this size is the Emilio Reggio school-within-school charter, which is housed at the Peabody Elementary School building.

[23] The free lunch, disability, and LEP/NEP indicators are conventionally used to assess special needs that schools face. But it is important to bear in mind that the accuracy of these data is somewhat problematic. Schools may vary in how aggressively they work to gather this information, and children and their families may vary in their willingness to be categorized in some instances.

[24] Valerie J. Martinez, R. Kenneth Godwin, Frank R. Kemerer, Laura Perna, "The Consequences of School Choice: Who Leaves and Who Stays in the Inner City" Social Science Quarterly 76, 3 (September, 1995); Godwin, Kemerer, & Martinez, FINAL REPORT: San Antonio School Choice Research Project, (University of North Texas Center for the Study of Education Reform, June 1997).

[25] RPP International, The State of Charter Schools 2000, Fourth-Year Report (Preliminary data from forthcoming study). Our thanks to the authors, and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education, for permitting us to use this as yet unpublished data.

[26] Ibid.

[27] For the statistical analysis, which includes charter schools that were pending to open in Fall 1999, see Jeffrey R. Henig, "Between Public and Private: Markets vs. Politics in the Evolution of Charter Schools" Paper presented at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, September 2-5, 1999.

[28] RPP, The State of Charter Schools Fourth-Year Report , forthcoming.

[29] RPP International, A Comparison of Charter School Legislation, Thirty-three States and the District of Columbia Incorporating Legislative Changes Though October, 1998, December, 1998.

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[30] The formula does not apply to funds from federal or other revenue sources, or to funds appropriated to other agencies and funds of the District government. Bill S13/B13-003.

[31] State level costs such are transportation for handicapped students, tuition payments for private placements for handicapped students, and state education agency functions of the DCPS system are not covered by the Formula and shall be appropriated by the Mayor and Council in addition to the amount generated by the Formula.

[32] Spearheaded by the Maya Angelou Public Charter School, this grant will be used to permit each school to hire part time social workers and psychologists for the participating schools.

[33] Beginning in FY 1999, a moving average formula is used. This moving average adds 1 year each year until a total of 5 years are included in the calculations.

[34] The level of payment for the academic year beginning in the fall of 1999 is under dispute at the time of this writing. The District Chief Financial Officer has estimated the amount at $825 per student, while charter school and educational reform advocacy organizations such as FOCUS and Parents United place the figure at $1192.

[35] This revolving fund ended up being used to provide critical additional payments to the charter schools when the FY1999 appropriations legislation was held up and Congress was forced to finance the District through the passage of continuing resolutions.

[36] RPP International, A Comparison of Charter School Legislation, (US DOE, 1999).

[37] District charter schools are also permitted to issue tax-exempt municipal bonds through the District of Columbia Government, although only the Edison-Friendship school has made use of this funding option so far.

[38] While this is the date specified in the law, for the academic year beginning in the fall of 1999 the due date for the count has been moved back to October 7 by the District.

[39] RPP, The State of Charter Schools .

[40] Communication with Shirley Monastra, executive director of the Charter School Resource Center.

[41] Jeffrey R. Henig, in collaboration with Mary DeCamp, Mark Kugler, and Jennifer Saunders, "The Nonprofit Sector: The Heart of Greater Washington: Assessing the Impact of the District's Fiscal

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Crisis," report prepared for the Washington Association of Grantmakers (July 1995); Joseph Cordes, Jeffrey R. Henig, Eric Twombly, and Jennifer Saunders, "Human Service Delivery in a Changing Funding Environment: Washington Area Nonprofits in an Era of Donor Choice" report prepared for the Metropolitan Washington Human Services Coalition and the Glen Eagles Foundation (Washington, D.C.: Center for Washington Area Studies, The George Washington University, April 1997).

[42] Congress actually provided for the possibility of a third chartering agency, which could be established by the City Council, although there has been no move in that direction.

[43] "Why Two Charter School Panels?" The Washington Post, October 13, 1999.

[44] §2213 (a).

[45] See, for example, Hassel, The Charter School Challenge p. 78.

[46] RPP, The State of Charter Schools Fourth-Year Report, forthcoming

[47] One study that is generally very favorable to the charter movement, notes that, in practice, charter schools may actually have more autonomy than one would assume if one looked at the laws and regulations on the books. Hassel's analysis of Colorado, Massachusetts, and Michigan concludes "political circumstances in these three states after the laws passed favored autonomy and differentiation. So although the laws themselves looked restrictive in some ways, post adoption politics made them permissive." In addition, "although charter schools were subject to many unexpected laws and regulations, these tended not to constrain them on the core elements of running their schools." The Charter School Challenge, p. 72.

[48] Gregg A. Garn and Robert T. Stout, "Closing Charters: How a Good Theory failed in Practice," in Maranto et al., School Choice in the Real World, p.148.

[49] The political science literature abounds with discussions and research on agency capture and policy subsystems. Some claim that they are natural features of a decentralized system of lawmakers. See Douglass Cater. 1964. Power in Washington: A Critical Look at Today's Struggle to Govern the Nation's Capital. New York: Random House; George J. Stigler. 1971. "The Theory of Economic Regulation", Bell Journal of Economics and Management Science, 2:3-21. Others believe that there is simply too much outside scrutiny and pressure from other actors to enter the game to permit such an arrangement to persist. See Hugh Heclo, "Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment" in The New American Political

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System ed. Anthony King. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1978; Robert H. Salisbury, Edward O. Laumann, John P. Heinz and Robert L. Nelson. 1992. "Iron Triangles, Sloppy Hexagons and Hollow Cores: The Complex Geometry of Washington Representation". In The Politics of Interests ed. Mark Petracca. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

[50] In fact, not all of the charter schools are administering the Stanford 9. At Next Step Public Charter School, the majority of the students is in English as a Second Language classes only and are not required to take the test. However, those students in the GED program, the only other program Next Step offers, are required to take the Stanford 9.

[51] E.g. James Coleman et al., Equality of Educational Opportunity Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1966; J. Epstein, "Parent Involvement: What the Research Says to Administrators, "Education & Urban Society 19,2 (Feb 1978): 119-136; S.S. Purkey & M. Smith, "Effective Schools: A Review," Elementary School Journal 83 (1983): 427-452.

[52] §2202 (14)

[53] §2205 (a)

[54] We asked this question of ten parents. Many of these parents were recommended by the school administrators, and therefore might be assumed to be more inclined to booster the school than might be the case for a random sample.

[55] RPP, The State of Charter Schools, Fourth-year report, p.44

[56] This threat of massive complete conversions from DCPS to charter status has not yet materialized, but there have been significant rumblings. During the 1998-9 school year, discussions about conversion at the generally well-regarded Duke Ellington High School of the Performing Arts were headed off when Superintendent Ackerman apparently agreed to give parents at the school sufficiently more control within the DCPS framework. During the fall of 1999, rumblings about conversion at Hearst--one of the Districts best-performing elementary schools—also attracted substantial attention.

[57] Michael Mintrom, Policy Entrepreneurs and School Choice. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, forthcoming.

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[58] P. Lantner, "The Short, Happy Life of the Adams Morgan Community School Project," Harvard Educational Review.1968 38(2): 235-262; Michael R. Williams, Neighborhood Organizing for Urban School Reform. N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 1989:95.

[59] See, for example, Judith Denton Jones, The Six Schools Complex: A Successful Innovation in Washington, DC's Public Schools (Washington, DC: Six Schools Council, 1987).

[60] The Charter School Challenge, 131;133.

[61] See, for example, Clarence N. Stone (ed.), Changing Urban Education. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998; Jeffrey R. Henig, Richard C. Hula, Marion Orr, and Desiree S. Pedescleaux, The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and the Challenge of Education Reform. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

[62] Of course, in some parts of the District, markets have left large areas under-served in terms of grocery stores, restaurants, and other consumer goods.

[63] The law stipulates that in general, chartering authorities shall approve petitions as long as those proposal is consistent with the law, the applicant is willing to make specified changes in order to meet the legal standards, and the applicant has the ability to carry out the project outlined. "If an eligible chartering authority denies a petition or finds a petition to be incomplete, the eligible chartering authority shall specify in writing the reasons for its decision..." [Section 2203 (d) (g).

[64] "Connecting Resources to Results," D5.

[65] Albert O. Hirschman, Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,1970:26.

[66] Susan L. Aud, Competition in Education: A 1999 Update of School Choice in Massachusetts. Boston, MA: Pioneer Institute for Public Policy research.

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